

REDEMPTION

GREGORY O. SCOTT

For Matthew Woodring Stover

Keep inching, wherever you are.

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Dramatis Personae

Myri Antilles, Wraith Squadron (human female)
Syal Antilles, captain, *Starless* (human female)
Bren Arefja, True Victory leader (Bothan male)
Natasi Daala, Imperial ex-admiral (human female)
Vilath Dal, shaper (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Miranda Fardreamer, agent (human female)
Jagged Fel, commander, Trinity Fleet (human male)
Wynssa Fel, captain, *Celestial* (human female)
Fy'lyor, captain, *Chimaera* (Twi'lek female)
Viull “Scut” Gorsat, Wraith Squadron (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Harrar, high priest (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Bardan Jusik, “Gotab,” ex-Jedi and healer (human male)
Vestara Khai, Sith apprentice (human female)
Darth Krayt, Dark Lord of the Sith (human male)
Traest Kre'fey, retired admiral (Bothan male)
Qelah Kwaad, former shaper (Yuuzhan Vong female)
Maal Lah, True Honor warmaster (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Danni Quee, magister (human female)
Voort “Piggy” SaBinring, Wraith Leader (Gamorrean male)
Venku Skirata, warrior (human male)
Ben Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)
Jaina Solo, Jedi Master (human female)
Jacen Solo, deceased Jedi and Sith Lord (human male)
Jesmin “Ranger” Tainer, ” (human female)
Tahiri Veila, former Jedi Knight (human female)

Order of Battle

Trinity Fleet

Commander Jagged Fel

Starless, Nebula II-class Star Destroyer

Captain Syal Antilles

Corusca Gem, Endurance-class carrier

Captain Mila Pavric

Liberty Star, Imperial II-class Star Destroyer

Captain Jaren Tharen

Andromeda, MC60i interdictor

Captain Omphlem

Vindicator, Imperial II-class Star Destroyer

Captain Sol Vernedet

Swift, Lancer-class frigate

Captain Jon Cohl

Nova Burn, Lancer-class frigate

Captain Dahl Orvaal

Celesial, Chiss heavy destroyer

Commodore Wynssa Fel

True Victory Fleet

Admiral Bref Aref'ja

Phoenix, Nebula II-class Star Destroyer

Captain Floran Welby

Sunbeam, Majestic-class heavy cruiser

Captain Terra Vatrim

Revolutionary, Victory II-class Star Destroyer

Captain Kalla Auburn

Cha Niathal, MC80a cruiser

Captain Trev Varin

Lacentra, MC80 cruiser

Captain Ginus

Fey'lya's Revenge, Bothan Assault Cruiser Mk II

Captain Krav Saiv'tu

Reyan Dey'rylan, Bothan Assault Cruiser

Captain Warn Entar'mal

Spirit of Borleias, DP20 gunsip

Undying Hope, DP20 gunship

Daala's Fleet

Admiral Natasi Daala

Chimaera, Imperial II-class Star Destroyer

Captain Fy'lyor

Resolve, Imperial I-class Star Destroyer

Captain Griff Veed

Repulse, Interdictor-class Star Destroyer

Captain Farl Rennis

Talon, Lancer-class frigate

Claw, Lancer-class frigate

Halberd, Marauder-class corvette

Schimitar, Marauder-class corvette

Lanvarok, Marauder-class corvette

Prologue: The Darkness Before

“It is a hard universe. No lesson is truly learned until it has been purchased with pain.”

“Maybe you’re right. But there has to be an easier way.”

The more he stared, the more he saw. His head was arched back to watch the night sky, and as he watched more and more stars seemed to resolve out of the blackness. Even as the stars shone brighter, the darkness itself seemed deeper, like an all-consuming abyss. Maybe it was the darkness of the sky that made the stars seem brighter, or maybe it was the other way around. He felt like he *should* know, and maybe had once, but couldn't remember any more.

"What are you looking at?" asked a soft female voice behind him.

Jacen Solo turned around. Though it was night, and he had wandered alone into the forests of the Middle Distance, he had no problem seeing the squat, birdlike figure watching him from a few meters away with black, curious eyes. The figure rested on reverse-articulated legs. Its head was cocked to one side in curiosity and a crest of red feathers flared atop its head. It seemed like the perfect image of his teacher, the late Vergere, but he knew it was not her. He'd feel Vergere's presence in the Force, for one. Even more obviously, she did not breathe out puffs of vapor from her nostrils, and she trailed no three-toed footprints behind her. The surface temperature on Zonama Sekot had dropped precipitously since the end of the Battle for Yuuzhan'tar, and now a thin layer of white snow formed a crinkly carpet over the forest floor, interrupted only by the solitary trail of Jacen's boots.

He regarded the face of a world for a long moment before he said, "Everything. I'm looking at everything."

The feathers on Vergere's neck ruffled in frustration. Sekot was so good at mimicry it was almost frightening.

The living planet said through Vergere's mouth, "That's not very helpful."

Jacen looked back up at the stars. "It feels like forever since I just... stopped and watched the sky."

The moment he said it, he recalled another time, maybe the last time. He had been with Vergere then, the real Vergere, on Coruscant, recently remade in the image of Yuuzhan'tar, the lost Yuuzhan Vong homeworld which they attempted to remake at the center of the dead New Republic, unaware that the true heir to Yuuzhan'tar was, in fact, Zonama Sekot itself. They had sat on the edge of a vine-laden cliff that had once been a building-side and watched the twinkling rainbow lights of the Bridge. It was there that Jacen had finally realized, once and for all, that the Yuuzhan Vong had changed the galaxy forever, and that he would have to change as well.

He was still changing, even now. It had been barely a week since his fight with Onimi, the true Supreme Overlord of the Yuuzhan Vong. With the help of his twin sister Jaina, he had stood firm and turned Onimi's poisonous attacks on himself. He had not fought with physical violence, but by allowing himself to become a true conduit for the Force, passing beyond all definitions of light and dark, good and evil, life and death. For that brief, astonishing moment, he had felt at one with the whole of the cosmos, beyond the plane of normal existence which he had striven his whole life to reach past.

Now he a normal man again, and he did not know what to do with himself.

He'd talked to Jaina already and told her his desire, however vague and ill-defined, to go out and explore the galaxy. He wanted to uncover the secrets of all the Force-using sects that had taken different paths than the Jedi or the Sith. He wanted to reach beyond the overly simplistic dichotomy and find a way to commune with the entire unifying Force once more. He knew the Aing-Tii, Theran Listeners, Baran Do Sages, and the rest would never individually help him reach the exalted state he had felt during his fight with Onimi, but he felt he had to try.

There was nothing he wanted more.

"You are restless, Jacen," Sekot observed.

"I've always been restless." Breath puffed in front of his face and was gone. "It's just been a long time since I didn't have anything to *do* with that restlessness."

"But you have decided to explore the galaxy, yes? You wish to find even more ways to experience the Force?"

Sometimes he forgot that he stood on the surface of a living being, one that could observe his actions and sense him in the Force even when he was not aware.

"Yes," he said, "I think I'd like to keep exploring."

"You wish to find out more about the Force, and in doing so learn more about yourself," Sekot observed. "In that, we are very much alike."

"You're hardly a typical being, Sekot."

"Neither are you, Jacen Solo."

Jacen blew out a long breath. "I guess you've got me there. How do you plan to learn more going forward?"

"I think you know. The Yuuzhan Vong are now arriving on this world. It is already proving to be an interesting family reunion."

"I can imagine."

"As I learn more about them, I learn about myself. It is a truly symbiotic relationship, the kind Yuuzhan'tar once had with the Yuuzhan Vong, before they became so warlike that Yuuzhan'tar pushed them onto a plane of the Force separate from those all other beings experience."

"Symbiosis," Jacen echoed. "Sounds nice, but I think I'm going to be doing this journey alone."

Vergere's mouth drooped in a slight frown. "It is not good to be alone, Jacen. Your family and friends depend on you, Your sister, especially, needs you, though I sense she is too proud to admit it."

"I know," he allowed. A part of him hated the idea of leaving Jaina and the rest of his family behind while he went off on some quest of self-discovery. "There are some things I can only do alone."

He truly believed that. All his life he'd sought a personal, individual relationship with the Force, which was why he'd

opposed Luke's creation of the Jedi Council for so long. The idea of the Jedi acting as nothing more than glorified political arbiters was still repulsive to him. The Force was so much more than that.

"You may be right." Vergere seemed distracted. She glanced the stars for a moment, then back at Jacen. Sekot asked, "When I was born as a conscious entity, I was alone. I was afraid. I was confused. I had just been attacked for the first time by the beings I now know as the Yuuzhan Vong. My children had bombed me and destroyed the home of the Magister, Leor Hal. It was the pain and trauma of his death that... woke me from a very long slumber."

"No lesson is truly learned until it has been purchased with pain," Jacen muttered.

It was something the real Vergere had told him, and he'd told her that he hoped to find another way. Even after his fight with Onimi, he wasn't sure if he had, but he was determined to keep trying.

"To this day that event keeps a lasting power over me," Sekot admitted. "I've come to view the place where Leor Hal died as a birthing chamber, and I feel... stronger there than anywhere else."

"You're a living *world*. Doesn't your presence extend to everything on the planet?"

"It does," Sekot admitted. "But even so, I've found that my powers and sense of *self* are stronger in some places than others, and strongest of all in that place of pain, that place where I was, after a fashion, born." Sekot laughed softly. "As I told you, I remain a mystery, even to myself."

"May I see this place?" Jacen asked.

He'd been so intent on searching for mysteries throughout the galaxy that he'd almost forgotten the great mystery beneath his feet.

"Of course," Sekot smiled with Vergere's face. "I was only waiting for you to ask. I would give you a little advice though, Jacen Solo. Dress warm. It's going to be very cold."

Jacen stood in a fantasy of white. The morning light shone through a filter of pale clouds, and the mountain slope on

which he stood was coated with thick snow. Even now, flakes lazily drifted through the air. The atmosphere on the mountaintop was thin and cold, and Jacen was dressed in a double-layer insulated suit with a fur-lined hood and a breathing mask attached to his mouth and nose. Even with nearly all his body covered, the icy wind still stung his eyes and the bridge of his nose.

Yet Sekot had told him to come here, so he had no choice.

He left behind the small organic Sekotan flier he had taken to the mountain and began walking up the slope, as the living world had instructed. He kept his head down against the wind and looked before taking every step forward. It took so much effort to keep his footing on the snowy, rocky slope that he entirely failed to look at what was further ahead of him.

Still, he felt it when he reached his destination. He picked his head up and saw something rising up out of the snow-laden mountainside. He saw what looked like pillars, and perhaps the remnants of a wall. He climbed further up the slope to examine the ruins more thoroughly.

They remained draped in snow, but he could tell when his feet moved off the rough scree of the mountain and onto the flat surface of what had once been the floor of a house. As he examined the ruins more he spotted a cave burrowing into the mountainside. Eager to get out of the biting wind, he stepped into the cave and turned on the glowrod he had brought with him.

The interior walls of the cave were smooth and angular. Surely, someone had carved this room into the mountain-side, probably as part of the building whose ruins lay strewn in the snow outside.

He felt a presence. His body stiffened.

It didn't have to speak. Jacen knew when it was there. He turned to see Vergere's form crouched in the mouth of the cave.

"You're not cold?" Jacen asked.

"*All* of me is cold," the living world said. "I am too far from Coruscant's primary. However, it does not hinder me the same way it does for you humans."

"Us humans," Jacen shook his head. "So weak, huh?"

"No. Some of you are quite resilient."

"Enough with the flattery, Sekot." Jacen hugged his arms around himself. "Can you tell me what I'm supposed to do here before I freeze to death?"

"You are the one who asked to come here, are you not?"

"Yeah, but you *wanted* me to come here. So what's the deal?"

Vergere's nostrils snorted breathlessly. "You humans, so impatient..."

"Well, some of us are freezing to death. Can you at least give me a hint as to why I dragged myself up here? Not even the real Vergere was this obtuse."

"Obtuse?" Vergere's head shook. "No matter. You are here, Jacen Solo, because I want you to try something for me."

"Such as?"

Vergere extended one feathery arm as if to shake. "Take my hand. Please."

Jacen stared at the four-fingered hand. He stared at her face. Her body moved in imitation of breath but no vapor came from her nostrils. He'd even been touched by Sekot in Vergere's form before; it had felt like nothing more than the faintest pressure. He knew he could walk straight through the Vergere-simalcrum if he wished. The living world could manifest images in the minds of its people, but could still not take physical form.

"Please," Sekot said.

Jacen shrugged, reached out. His fingers wrapped around Vergere's hand.... and held on tight.

He stared in shock. A slight, ambiguous smile appeared, so like the ones Vergere used to sport.

He gave the hand a slight pull and tugged Vergere's body forward half a step.

"I don't.... I don't understand," Jacen muttered, afraid to release his grip on the arm of Vergere, or Sekot, or whatever was in the cave with him.

"It is all right, Jacen." The smile remained on Vergere's face. "I have found that in this place, this cave where my existence was purchased with the pain of Leor Hal's death, I can come closer to touching the Unifying Force... and perhaps discovering the secret that lies in the darkness before my awakening."

"But... What am I holding?"

“This world contains all the building-blocks of life, Jacen Solo. Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen... All I have to do is draw on them, arrange them in the patterns and bind them together with the Force. In this way I hope I can speak directly to my children instead of using Magister Jabitha as a vessel.”

“You're building yourself... a body? But is it *you*? I mean, it's not Vergere herself... is it?”

Jacen stared at that face, that ambiguous smile. Suddenly something began to change. The feathers on Vergere's face seemed to wilt; her face grew visibly more worn. Something in the black well of her eyes seemed to change. Her fingers tightened their grip on Jacen's wrist and, suddenly, Jacen felt something through the Force like a punch. It was a familiar sensation, a familiar *presence*, one he hadn't though he'd ever see against after it faded away in front of him in a dark mining tunnel on the desolate world of Ebaq 9.

“Vergere!” he shouted. He jerked his hand back in shock, twisting his wrist free. Suddenly Vergere's presence was gone. Her image winked out too, right before his eyes, leaving Jacen to stare at snow drifting against filmy white clouds beyond the cave mouth.

He stayed there for what seemed like forever, holding one hand in the other, waiting for some explanation as to what had happened.

It finally came when he heard a long, drawn-out sigh behind him. He turned around and saw a short, blue-eyed, round-faced human boy, maybe twelve years old. He had dirty-blond hair chopped short except for a single braid that hung onto the shoulder of his thin white tunic.

It took Jacen a moment to realize he was looking at the image of his late grandfather. He still struggled to understand how such a small, innocent-looking boy could become the horror that was Darth Vader.

He hated when Sekot appeared in this form; his dead mentor's image was discomfiting, but it was still far better than this reminder that even the best of the Jedi could become a monster.

“What happened?” Jacen demanded. He was in no mood for games.

"It's a little hard for me to understand too." Anakin Skywalker crossed his arms over his chest. Sekot said, "I can give shape and form to myself, but I can also... call on those lost."

"That was Vergere! I felt her through the Force! How did you do it?"

"Vergere was very important to me," Sekot said. "She helped awaken me to my true self. It is possible that the link she forged with me in life... created a tether that ties me to her still, even in death." The sophisticated words sounded so strange from a child's mouth.

"Can you do that? Can you... reach beyond death?" Jacen stared into the eyes of Anakin Skywalker but all he could think about was the other Anakin, his younger brother who had died saving the Jedi from the voxyn at Myrkyr.

He was suddenly overcome by the desire to talk to Anakin again, even if just for one minute, just so he could let him know that his sacrifice was not in vain, that the Jedi were strong and united as never before, that they had brought peace to the Yuuzhan Vong and come to a new understanding of the Force itself.

But as he stared into Anakin Skywalker's eyes, he knew his wish would never be. The living world sensed that too. The boy shook his head and Sekot said, "I'm sorry, Jacen. I can't touch your brother. I never knew him. Even with Vergere I feel merely... shadows. Intimations. I am still learning these abilities myself."

"I understand," Jacen said, though in truth whatever self-discovery Sekot was going through had staggering implications. It could further alter the Jedi's already-changing understanding of the nature of the Force.

He wondered if, somehow, the living world was not also drawing on the same wellspring of cosmic power that he had used to defeat Onimi.

"It will take time for me to work this out," Sekot said. "As I said, I am barely beginning to understand my own mysteries."

"I know," Jacen nodded gravely. "And I'll keep this a secret, if you want."

"Please do," Anakin Skywalker nodded.

Jacen stared into the blue eyes of his grandfather and wondered, just for an instant, if Sekot could reach into the Force and touch the spirit of his dead grandfather. Jacen's Uncle Luke, as well as his mother Leia, had claimed to speak with the ghost of Anakin Skywalker shortly after Darth Vader's death.

It was through these visions that they knew that Anakin Skywalker, for all the horrible things he'd done in life, had been redeemed in the end, and merged peacefully with the Force to join his old masters, Obi-Wan and Yoda, in whatever lay beyond the end.

In this way, Anakin Skywalker's tale had not just been a cautionary one of how a Jedi could fall, but an uplifting one of how even the most evil could save themselves. Just as the greatest Jedi could fall, so could the worst Sith be redeemed if he truly sought redemption.

"Is there something you want to ask me, Jacen?" asked the young, innocent face of Darth Vader.

"No." Jacen shook his head. "I understand you'll need time to develop this skill. I'll give you that time. But I'd like to come back some day, and see what you've discovered."

"And I would like to see what *you* discover, Jacen."

"It's a deal then." Jacen did his best to smile, despite all the confusion and discomfort he felt.

"It is." Anakin Skywalker adopted a smile that was almost Vergere-like in its playful ambiguity. "Until then."

His grandfather's image faded away before Jacen's very eyes, leaving him alone in the dark cave. He hugged himself, gathering heat to his body and pondering the new mysteries Sekot had uncovered. The possibilities were tantalizing, frightening, and exciting, he but knew there was nothing he could do about them now.

Jacen gave the cave one last look around, saw nothing of interest, and went out into the snow.

Part I: The Son

"I know that you can't fight darkness with darkness. So maybe a Jedi shouldn't fight violence with violence either. Sometimes I even think that the more you fight evil, the more you empower it."

Jacen Solo, 26 years ABY

"Did you find it?"

"Some of it."

"So you're going back?"

"No. What I haven't found, I doubt I ever will."

Ben Skywalker and his cousin, 35 years ABY

"I want you to know that whatever I do, no matter how much of a stranger you think I become, I love you, you're my heart, every fiber of it. Nothing matters to me more than you."

Mara Jade Skywalker to her son, 40 years ABY

A LONG TIME AGO...

Ben Skywalker stands in his cousin's apartment. The sun is going down over Galactic City and the towers of Coruscant's skyline, each one a unique and artful thrust toward invisible stars, light up one by one against a backdrop of ever-deepening reds and violets. Sunset in Galactic City is beautiful, but Ben barely notices. He stands in front of Jacen's dining table, double-checking the items he's crammed into his bag. Jacen told him to pack light, but also to pack everything that could conceivably help them on their mission. So now, as the sun goes down and the lights come up, he deliberates over each and every item. He knows this mission will be dangerous and he wants to be totally prepared. Just as importantly, he does not want to let his cousin down.

The door to Jacen's bedroom opens and his cousin walks out. Jacen is dressed in a plain dark-brown jacket and trousers. His lightsaber dangles from his belt, the only outward sign that he is a Jedi. Jacen hardly ever wears Jedi robes like Jaina or his parents, and when he's hanging around Jacen, neither does Ben. And that suits Ben perfectly fine, because he doesn't like Jedi robes. He doesn't like the lingering looks he gets from passers-by, that mix of awe and fear that separates him from ordinary beings. He doesn't like the Jedi Temple either, or the looks he gets from the people there, which are at once patronizing and reverent.

When he's with Jacen, he's not the son of the most powerful Jedi alive. He's not afraid to draw on the Force like he was in his childhood, hiding out the Yuuzhan Vong War on the Maw.

Ben only feels like himself when he's with Jacen.

"Well Ben," Jacen asks, hands on his hips as he stands in the middle of his kitchen, "Are you packed?"

"I think so." Ben deliberately takes a step back from his bag, wordlessly inviting Jacen to examine it and make sure he didn't screw anything up.

Jacen doesn't seem to notice the offer. "Well, good, because I've got everything I need packed too. We've got an hour before our ship is set to leave, but I think it's good to be early, don't you?"

Ben nods. Jacen trusts him to take care of himself, and that means more than he can say. He reaches forward and closes the bag tight.

Jacen ducks back into his room and comes out against with a satchel slung over his shoulder. Ben takes his bag and does the same, though at thirteen his bag looks and feels a lot bigger than Jacen's. For a second it threatens to tip him over.

"You okay, Ben?" Jacen asks, a slight smile on his face.

"I'm good," Ben nods. "I'm ready for anything."

"Well you should be." The smile doesn't leave. "Adumar is a very... strange planet with a very different culture."

"Have you been there before?"

Jacen shakes his head. "No, but I've read all the material from Alliance intelligence. Just like you have, I assume."

"Of course," Ben says. In truth, the datapad with all the info on Adumar is crammed into his pack. He's been saving it for the long trip there.

Jacen probably senses his lie, but he doesn't seem to care. "Good. That means you know the Adumari pride themselves on their fighting skills. They also have a strong sense of honor, which means their honor is going to be really offended when we bust the illegal missile manufacturing operation they've got going."

"Which means we could have to fight out way out."

Ben feels a little dry in the mouth. This won't be his first combat mission with Jacen, but it still makes him feel uneasy.

"I'm kind of counting on it." The smile is gone from Jacen's face now. Very seriously, he takes a step closer and lays a hand

on Ben's shoulder. "You should be careful. I don't want to have to tell your mom and dad I let you get hurt on my watch."

Ben can feel Jacen's concern flowing through the Force. He says, "Don't worry, Jacen. I know you've got my back."

His cousin pats him on the shoulder. "Just as long as you've got mine."

Ben smiles. He can't help it. Jacen isn't his parents, or the teachers at the Academy, or the normal people on the street. To Jacen he's not an heir, not a son, not a mysterious magician or a noble warrior. He's a man, a capable and responsible adult, the kind he really wants to be.

Jacen withdraws his hand. "Okay, Ben, let's get going. Adumar awaits."

Jacen turns to go. Ben follows him over the threshold, and once they are through the threshold Jacen closes and locks it tight, leaving the apartment cool and empty as the dark night begins to fall.

Chapter 1

A cool breeze washed over the clearing. Grasses rippled under invisible force and the bora trees in the distance wavered, rustled. It caught Ben in the face but he couldn't look away, couldn't even blink.

It was Jacen, but it wasn't. It *couldn't* be. The Jacen walking toward them through the field of tall rippling grass (his hair, Ben noticed, unmoving despite the wind) was not any Jacen he remembered. Certainly not the Jacen he had spoken to in the Lake of Apparitions, restless and bitter, no longer Sith but not repentant of what he'd done. Not Darth Caedus either, whose gold-rimmed eyes blazed with fury. And not the Jacen *before* Caedus either, at least not the one Ben remembered meeting after he returned from his five-year odyssey across the galaxy in search of new Force users. Looking back, he realized there had been something grim about that Jacen, something tired, something resigned, even before he sold his soul to Lumiya in an attempt to bring peace to the galaxy.

This Jacen was like no Jacen Ben could remember. His steps were confident but light. His eyes were alert and eager. His face was not young. It had been through too much for that, but it was not tired the way Ben remembered. It looked like it belonged to a man ready to go exploring.

"Sekot," Tahiri said confidently, not shocked at all.

The living planet. Of course, Ben thought. He'd been told about this. The living world could manifest itself with thought-projections, taking the shape of other beings it had met. Now it chose to greet them with the form of Jacen Solo, Jacen as he

was *before* he began his long awful fall to become Darth Caedus.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Why?" he heard Jaina rasp. She wasn't laughing or crying. She was angry. "Why *him*?"

Sekot stopped a few meters away from them. Jacen's eyes blinked once, twice. His voice said, "I'm sorry. I thought you would appreciate a familiar face."

"Please," said Tahiri more steadily, "We would appreciate someone else."

"Very well," Sekot said. And then Jacen was gone and a Yuuzhan Vong woman stood before them. She was tall and thin, her face lined by tattoos but no scars. She wore the tall, tentacle-topped headdress of a member of their shaper caste. She appeared without Ben's even blinking. Jacen was there one moment, this Yuuzhan Vong scientist (also dead?) the next.

"Is this better?" the planet asked.

"That one's all right," Tahiri said. She looked at Ben, then at Jaina, whose hands were still clenched in white fists at her side. "Neither of you met her, but this... face Sekot is wearing belonged to Nen Yim. She was the Yuuzhan Vong scientist whose memories were implanted in me."

The Yuuzhan Vong nodded. The tentacles in her headdress bobbed slightly in imitation of natural motion but did not stir in the wind. "It is fine to see you again. Are you calling yourself Tahiri now, or Riina?"

"You can call me Tahiri," the blond Jedi said.

She did not show the visible discomfort Jaina did, even though Sekot had brought back the traumatic moments of her past, when the implanted Yuuzhan Vong memories had warred with her natural ones, and the only solution had been to force a compromise where both 'selves' existed within the body of a slim, short woman with gold hair, green eyes, and three scars over her forehead as a reminder of what she was deep down.

Tahiri seemed calm, almost confident, even as she looked into the eyes of the person she'd almost been.

Ben wished he could say the same. Still, his sense of confusion and discomfort was nothing compared to the indignation rolling off Jaina in the Force.

“Why did you bring us here?” she demanded. “Did you have us land out here to talk to us? Because I'd have *much* rather set down in a nice settlement. We have a lot of questions that need answering.”

“I am sure you do.” The image of Nen Yim folded its hands patiently over its waist. Ben was struck by the long fingers, each digit deformed by biological instruments grafted onto flesh and bone. “However, those instructions did not come from me. I understand that the Magister wishes to treat new arrivals with caution. A party is coming to meet you as we speak.”

“I can feel them,” Tahiri said, voice soft but firm.

“I don't,” Jaina said.

Ben tried to put the strange thing in front of him out of his mind and reached out with the Force. He felt nothing beyond the general sensation of plant and animal life in the forest around them. Not even Sekot's thought projection registered.

“It's Yuuzhan Vong,” Tahiri said.

“Oh,” Ben muttered. He'd almost forgotten, but Tahiri's experience with the Yuuzhan Vong, her captivity and alteration surgeries, had left her with the ability to sense other Yuuzhan Vong and Vong-formed life via a faint sense of telepathy, less like the Force and more like the thought signals used by their yammosk war machines to communicate. He remembered that Jacen had possessed those abilities too.

“Can we trust them?” Jaina asked.

Nen Yim's head nodded. “Of course.”

“We met some of Yuuzhan Vong already who weren't too friendly,” Ben said. “Are these different?”

“Certainly.” Sekot seemed faintly offended. “The ones you encountered are a splinter faction. Wayward children.”

“They're very deadly children,” Jaina said.

Sekot nodded gravely. “I understand. And that is why I hope you will help bring them home to me.”

“You'd welcome them?” Tahiri asked, before Jaina could interject.

“I already did once.” Nen Yim's head tilted back, like she was listening to something beneath the whistle of wind and the rustling of trees and grass.

"They're almost here," Tahiri said.

"And so I'll leave you now," the living world said. "However, I would like to ask one brief question."

"Go ahead," Tahiri said. She had apparently become the leader of the expedition.

"My projection of the late Nen Yim didn't distress you, did it?"

Tahiri shook her head. "No. It was actually... a little nice."

"And yet my projection of Jacen Solo did?"

Silence fell over the group. Ben said, "Jacen's dead."

"I know." Nen Yim's face looked at him. There was something doubly alien in those eyes. "I felt his passing in the Force, and that of your mother."

Ben stiffened. He remembered that Zonama Sekot had gone missing *before* Jacen began his downfall, before he had killed Mara Jade Skywalker.

"Do you know how they died?" Ben asked.

"No. I was hoping you could tell me, at a later time."

Jaina blew out a long, long sigh. "At a later time."

The living world seemed to sense the darkness lingering over them. It nodded and said, "I look forward to it."

And then it was gone.

Ben, Jaina, and Tahiri stood in the middle of the field, cold wind whipping tall grass around their waists, and none of them could think of anything to say.

A short time or a while later, Ben saw figures coming from the far side of the clearing. They were approaching rapidly, and he realized that they were not just humanoid Yuuzhan Vong, as he'd been expecting, but Yuuzhan Vong mounted *atop* something else.

He sensed Jaina and even Tahiri tense. He unclipped his lightsaber from his belt but did not ignite, not yet. As they got closer he realized they were riding three bipedal animals. They powered forward on two thick, birdlike legs that supported a fat, scaled body with a long tail and flat reptilian head that ran parallel to the grass. Two Yuuzhan Vong rode atop each creature.

They moved fast, and had the Jedi surrounded before they could do anything to defend themselves.

For a long, long moment the three creatures eyed the Jedi hungrily, while the Yuuzhan Vong looked down impassively. Their faces bore the elaborate tattoos Ben had come to expect from the Yuuzhan Vong, but none of their faces bore the elaborate deformations and implants he'd seen in holos. Some had scarring, yes, but it seemed faint, and artfully covered by the tattoos. Each of them seemed to have an amphistaff curled around his waist, and Ben certainly recognized those snake-like, armored, living weapons from the holos.

Tahiri broke the tense silence. "Verao Shai? Is that you?"

A Yuuzhan Vong sitting on the creature directly in front of them leaned in close. He wore white facepaint to go with his black tattoos, and Ben thought he saw signs of some elaborate scarring beneath the chalky color. He had no idea how to guess Yuuzhan Vong ages, but this one looked a little older than the rest.

"*Torunk'rash? Velar pe'tal voran* Riina Kwaad?" the Yuuzhan Vong asked. Ben picked out the name at least.

"*Ket'al mar vorush ni'yat!*" Tahiri said. The words sounded strange and harsh on her tongue, but she did not look angry; happy, almost.

The Yuuzhan Vong, Verao Shai apparently, made a weird sound that was someplace between a snort and a rattle. Ben realized that he must have been laughing.

"*Kel'ash morut ni'yat*, Riina Kwaad," Shai gave a 'come forward' gesture. His mouth had no lips, but he opened his teeth a little, apparently in some grotesque imitation of a human smile.

"Let's go," Tahiri said.

"You want us to get on those things?" Ben gaped. The one Shai was riding was staring at him hard with a pair of black reptilian eyes, like it had found its next meal.

"The *ni'yat* is harmless," Tahiri insisted. "They can carry up to three, so one on each."

"Where are they taking us?" Jaina asked. She was eying the *ni'yat* with the same suspicion Ben was.

Tahiri looked at Verao Shai and asked, "*Tz'pol kreesh ver'al mokh Voorth? Weelak?*"

"*Kol fleeth morak huth majiztar pel'unt.*"

“Did he just say 'Magister'?” Jaina asked.

“What's a magister?” Ben asked. “Some kind of.... ruler?” He didn't know why a planet with its own consciousness would need a ruler, but frankly he understood next to nothing about Zonama Sekot, and some the explanations he'd already gotten about it from Tahiri, Jacen, and his parents, nobody else really did either.

“The Magister is the living authority on this planet,” Tahiri explained. “When I was here last it was a Ferroan woman named Jabitha.”

“Ferroans are the natives, right?”

“They colonized the planet less than two centuries ago. If anyone is really *from* Sekot, well, the Yuuzhan Vong come closest.”

“Oh. So they're sharing the world now? How's that working out?”

Tahiri glanced at Verao Shai, then back at Ben. “I guess we'll find out.”

It didn't Ben long to decide that travel by *ni'yat* was not his preferred method. The beasts threw you about when they ran, they smelled like sour milk for some reason, and he still wasn't convinced his mount didn't want to eat him.

One thing he *was* impressed by was the fact that the animals were able to nimbly navigate around the dense forest of bora trees, and Ben did not get a single branch of low-hanging, multi-colored leaves in his face. It was as if the creatures, the forest itself, or both were somehow acting to keep him from accidental harm. Even though he could feel the bora trees in the Force and the *ni'yat* not at all, they seemed to operate in perfect communion with one another.

That should have made Ben feel better, but it didn't. There were still far too many unknowns, and beyond them was one the one thing he *did* know that was worst of all. Vestara Khai was out there somewhere, fighting with these wayward Vong, and while the idea a Yuuzhan Vong-Sith alliance was terrifying, it wasn't half as terrifying as the idea of facing Vestara again.

He tried to push the Sith girl out of his thoughts, but he'd never been very good at that, even before she betrayed him and almost gotten his cousin Allana killed.

This time, at least he got the distraction of a terrifying *ni'yat* ride across forest and plain, and their eventual arrival in a town nested in a small valley.

He'd seen pictures of cities on Zonama Sekot before, but now that he was actually in one he was impressed by the graceful domes of the buildings, the way the organic huts and towers rose seamlessly out of the earth. He was impressed, too, with the mix of beings milling about the buildings. There seemed to be equal numbers Yuuzhan Vong and blue-skinned beings he took to be Ferroans. Everyone paused to watch as the new arrivals as their *ni'yat* mounts strode down the town's center lane. Young Yuuzhan Vong with painted, unscarred faces stopped and stared slaw-jawed. Ferroans peeked out of huts, almost timidly. A blue-skinned woman held a child in her arms, and as Ben passed the child held out one fat hand to wave.

It was all Ben could do to wave back.

Their mounts finally came to a half in front of one broad domed building at the end of the lane. A mixed party of Ferroans and Yuuzhan Vong were waiting for them, and Ben scanned for Jabitha.

He didn't know what Jabitha looked like, but he was expecting some hunched, matronly old Ferroan. He didn't see any of those, but he was surprised to see a human woman, on the young side of middle age, with curly blond hair half-tied at the back of her neck. She had her hands folded in front of her and a warm smile on her face.

He dropped directly from the back of the *ni'yat*, using the Force to cushion his fall. Tahiri and Jaina did the same, and his cousin went directly toward the blond woman at the head of the group awaiting them.

"Danni!" Jaina exclaimed. "Are you..."

A warm smile formed on the woman's face. "I am the Magister here. It's been a very long time. It's good to see you, Jaina. And you, Tahiri."

"It's good to be back," the other blond woman said. The Ferroans and Yuuzhan Vong clustered around this Danni woman looked surprised as she and Jaina walked right up to their Magister and exchanged warm hugs.

As Jaina stepped out of the embrace she gestured back at Ben. "I think you two met a long time ago. Danni, this is my cousin Ben. Ben, this is Danni Quee. She was a scientist who helped us during the war."

Jaina didn't say *which* war, and that put Ben off for a moment. For him, *the war* was the one that began with a mission to an illegal Adumari missile factory and ended with his mother dead and his cousin a fallen Sith Lord. But to Danni, and probably everyone else on Zonama Sekot from here on out, *the war* was the one he'd been born during.

The shock of time visibly shook Danni. The Magister put a hand over her opened mouth and her eyes went wide. When she finally composed herself she said, "Hello, Ben. I doubt you remember me."

"Yeah," Ben scratched his head awkwardly. "It's been a while."

"Yes, it has," Danni took her hand away from her mouth. She looked the group over and said, "You have no idea what it's like to see someone from my corner of the galaxy. I'd like to extend a warm welcome to all of you on Sekot's behalf."

"Actually," Jaina said, "We already got one when we landed."

Danni's eyes went wide again. A few of the Ferroans and Yuuzhan Vong started whispering among themselves.

"I see," Danni said eventually. She clearly wanted to say more, but this was not the place. She gestured to the building behind her. "Please. Let's have a seat and talk privately. I'm sure we all have stories to tell."

After a moment of visible reluctance, the crowd parted to allow them access to the structure's round black porthole. Danni went in first, followed by Jaina and Tahiri, with Ben bringing up the rear. The crowd lingered outside the door, whispering again, but none tried to enter.

The inside of the building was like nothing Ben had ever seen before. The ceiling was low and curved, befitting the shape of the exterior. Round pillars rose to support the roof at seemingly random locations, and seemed attached the floor and ceiling both by tree-like roots. Shelves protruded from the walls and were bound by objects wrapped in woven cloth or leather. Danni led them to a spot on the floor, where they sat

down on a carpet with intricately-woven designs in red and orange that contrasted with the cool green-blue tone of the ceiling, walls, and floor.

"This is *grown*," Ben stated the obvious, because for him at least, it was like nothing in the known galaxy. Certainly not the endless artificiality of Coruscant, or the old stone ruins of Ossus. He wondered if the entire planet was like this.

Danni nodded as she sat with her legs crossed, white hands folded in her lap. "This entire village was created less than ten standard years ago."

Ben looked around and gave an impressed whistle. The curiously organic nature of the village made it seem as old and ageless as the valley and forests in which it was placed.

"I remember," Tahiri said. "Before I left, we were planning to grow more cities and towns."

"This is one of them," Danni said. "As you can see, we've settled it with a mixed Ferroan and Yuuzhan Vong population."

"How is that working?" Tahiri asked. To Ben and Jaina, she explained, "When I left, the populations were still largely in separate cities. Mostly on separate *continents*. Neither group was keen and mixing and—" She stopped herself, shook her head. "We can get to all that later. There's more important things, aren't there?"

"There are," Jaina nodded, then said pointedly to Danni, "You were surprised when we said we'd spoken to Sekot."

"Yes," Danni sighed. The woman, who until now had projected a certain ageless elegance, looked suddenly old. She said, "Sekot has not spoken to me, or to my knowledge anyone on this planet, since True Honor left."

"True Honor," Jaina repeated. "That's what the renegade Yuuzhan Vong fleet calls itself?"

Danni nodded. "Have you had contact with them?"

"A bit, yeah. But most of that 'contact' has actually been with *another* renegade fleet. We've been fighting them too. There's a mixed Imperial-Alliance fleet out there, trying to find Zonama Sekot."

"Like yours," Danni said.

"Like ours," Jaina allowed, "But they want to exterminate every last Yuuzhan Vong in the galaxy and I don't think they'll

shed tears if Sekot goes out with them. If anything, this world is probably their primary target.”

“The True Honor faction always said it would happen,” Danni said gravely.

“And the True Victory people- *our* renegades- said the Vong were going back on the warpath. Looks like they proved each other right.”

“This True Victory fleet, is it led by the Bothans?”

“The commander is a Bothan, but it has all types. There's a lot of people who still hold a grudge because of what happened in the war.”

“I know,” Danni said. “I was one of them, at least in the beginning. But we're making great progress. We've made great strides in reforming the priest caste, and elevating the Extolled.”

“You clearly didn't pacify the warriors,” Ben said.

Danni could have taken it as a harsh rebuke, but the woman nodded in acceptance. “They've always been the most difficult to work with. It was mostly them who started the True Honor movement.”

“Where did they get a fleet?” Tahiri asked. “After the treaty, their warships were flown into Coruscant's sun. They take a lot of time and energy to grow too. I know it's been ten years since I was here, but I don't remember any warships being grown then.”

“The ships True Honor uses are not newly-grown,” Danni said. “The... circumstances are still unclear to us, but it seems they were ships abandoned by Yuuzhan Vong coming to Zonama Sekot and left in other systems throughout the galaxy. Someone gathered them, repaired them, and readied them for combat.

“Why weren't they destroyed?” Ben asked.

“It's a big galaxy,” Tahiri said. “And it was a huge war. There's still abandoned ships from the Empire or the Clone Wars that are being found. It's no surprise there are lost Yuuzhan Vong ships too.”

“It must have taken a lot of effort to find and repair all those ships,” Ben spoke up. “I thought all the Yuuzhan Vong were supposed to be on Zonama Sekot.”

"Yes," Danni said. "They *should* have been. As I said, it's still something we don't fully understand."

"So let's wind things back," Jaina said. "This True Honor movement, when did it leave Zonama Sekot?"

Danni thought a moment. "About three months ago. As I said, I haven't heard from Sekot since then. I have been... worried."

To Ben she looked more than worried. She looked like a woman trying very hard to cover deep, almost spiritual doubts about everything she'd been doing with her life, and he felt sorry for her.

Instead of prying in this direction with a woman he barely knew, Ben asked, "Why did Zonama Sekot leave its old location five years ago? What happened?"

Danni swallowed. "There was an incident. Zonama was attacked by... some beings. Nothing we were familiar with."

"Can you describe them?" Jaina asked.

"I can try. They used strange, crystal-like ships, each no bigger than a shuttle, but they attacked like swarms. They dove into our atmosphere and attacked our towns and villages. Many died."

"They don't sound familiar," Tahiri said.

"How did you defeat them?" Ben asked. He'd heard that Sekot had terrible defensive power, enough to wipe out an entire fleet if it so chose.

"We didn't," Danni said. "Rather than fight and destroy them, Sekot elected to jump to hyperspace. However, the jump and the attack left us gravely damaged. All our long-range communication systems were down. Navigation was also wrecked. The previous Magister, Jabitha, was killed, as was the warriors' leader Nos Choka."

"It must have been horrible," Tahiri said. Imagined scenes of devastation were probably playing with particular vividness in her mind.

"It was," Danni nodded gravely. "Worse than the physical damage was the spiritual damage. Many Yuuzhan Vong felt betrayed by Sekot and the new teachings we've tried to introduce."

"So they formed True Honor," Jaina said.

"The movement existed before, but it grew greatly after the disaster," Danni nodded. "Nos Choka was a moderating influence on the warriors, and losing him hurt a lot. It created an opening for more extreme voices, especially from members of Domain Lah. Even those who weren't tempted to return to the old ways were very worried. We waited for some Alliance team to come and find us. And we kept waiting... year after year. Nobody came. Some of us felt betrayed."

She tried to keep the bitterness from her voice, but it was radiating off of her through the Force. Ben could only imagine what it had been like for a human to be cut off from her own kind, left to guide an alien civilization without anyone to depend on. He barely knew Danni Quee, but his heart went out to her.

As if to shirk off Ben's pity, Danni said, "I'm sure we weren't easy to find. And I'm sure things have happened that kept you from finding us until now."

You could say that again, Ben thought, but he didn't say anything. He didn't know where to begin.

"Have you heard anything about the Alliance?" Jaina asked cautiously. "Anything at all?"

Danni shook her head and looked down. "I only know that your brother Jacen is dead. And your Aunt too." She looked up at Ben. "Sekot felt them pass in the Force. I'm so sorry."

Ben's throat tightened. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"We are too," Tahiri said. "Believe me."

Cautiously, Danni asked, "Can you explain what happened?"

Jaina shook her head. "We can talk about it later. What matters now is that Master Skywalker sent us to save you *and* the Yuuzhan Vong. There's more to this than just renegades. The Sith are involved too."

"The *Sith*?" Danni's jaw dropped. "The Sith have returned? How?"

"That's another long story," Jaina sighed. "What we're dealing with now... Well, we don't actually know much about these Sith. Master Skywalker encountered one a few years ago and we've been trying to track them ever since. If True Honor had help putting together a fleet, I bet it came from them."

"That's horrible," Danni said. "I had no idea things were that bad."

"Things could get a whole lot worse if we don't work together," Jaina said. "We'd like to help you rebuild your engines, your navigation and transmitters, all of that. Can we bring more people down?" When Danni looked hesitant, she pressed, "I remember the old rules. No warships. But we can bring down *people*, right?"

Danni nodded. "I think that should be okay."

"Good." Jaina looked relieved, and Ben remembered that one of her *Mando* friends, if that was the word, was lying up in *Celestial's* hangar in a coma. She'd wanted to bring him down to see if Sekot could heal him.

"What about defense?" Tahiri asked. "If it were under attack by the Sith, would Sekot defend itself with force?"

Danni thought for a long time, but in the end all she could say was, "I don't know. I'm sorry, I just I don't know."

"It's okay," Jaina said. "We brought a lot of ships with us. They can help us defend."

She didn't say that their flagship was badly damaged, and that they'd already lost two gunships and a star destroyer fighting the renegade True Victory fleet. A fight against either True Honor *or* a rematch with True Victory could prove very costly, and Ben was quietly hoping the two renegade fleets finished each other off.

It would save him another encounter with Vestara too. That would be a relief, but he knew the universe wasn't that nice.

"If it's all right with you," Jaina told Danni, "I'd like to talk to the fleet. Do you have any transmitters in this village?"

"There is something," Danni said, and started to rise.

"Good." Jaina got to her feet, as did Ben and Tahiri. "I'll call Jag and tell him to start sending down people."

"Jag?" Danni's eyes lit with recognition. "Do you mean Jagged Fel?"

"Yep," Jaina nodded. "Commander of Task Force Trinity, as we call it. Also, my husband."

"*Husband*," Danni's mouth broke into a white smile, but tears welled in her eyes. She stepped forward and clasped Jaina's arm. "Oh, I'm so glad. How long?"

“Just a couple years,” Jaina said, a little awkwardly. “It took a while to sort things out.”

“Oh, I’m so glad,” Danni squeezed Jaina’s arm hard. “I’m glad there’s *something* left worth celebrating.”

With visible reluctance, Jaina’s hard face cracked its own smile. It looked tired but true. “Yeah. I guess there is.”

Chapter 2

Syal Antilles felt like she'd barely had time to breath. It had been only a few hours since her sister Myri had appeared before her, resurrected, weeks after she'd resigned herself to the fact that her only sister was as lost to her as her fiancée Tiom, who'd died at Balmorra four long years ago. Syal had been unable to control all the feelings surging through her, and had ended up collapsed and sobbing on her bed in unspeakable joy.

But she was still an officer of the Galactic Alliance Navy, captain of the flagship *Starless*, which was even now undergoing repairs as it orbited Zonama Sekot. The battle to rescue Myri and her commander Jagged Fel had been a costly one; *Starless* herself had taken heavy damage and two gunship escorts, *Viridian* and *Cerulean*, had been destroyed with all hands. *Starless* had taken some revenge by destroying one of their cruisers, but the fact remained that Task Force Trinity had been weakened and dangerous enemies lurked nearby that they were not prepared to face.

Still, they had reached their destination and Myri was back from the dead. Syal had to keep a smile off her face as she went into the conference room to hear Commander Fel's briefing.

Her first sight of Fel was immediately sobering. Her cousin wore the specially-tailored uniform designed for his unique position, with an Alliance shape, Chiss-black color, and Imperial-red bloodstripes running down the flanks. That much hadn't changed. His face, however, was pale and gaunt, and a black eyepatch clung to a strap over his left eye. The flesh on

that side of his face seemed pink and tender. One of his hands was wrapped in bacta patches, and his other arm swelled with more patches concealed by the cuff of his uniform.

When Syal walked into the room, he nodded curtly, but didn't say a thing. Syal went straight for her seat, and was embarrassed to find that she was the last one at the conference table.

The rest of Trinity's senior commanders had already gathered. Next to Syal was Sol Vernetet, captain of the largest remaining Imperial vessel, *Vindicator*. The previous flagship, *Justifier*, had been destroyed in a sneak attack by Admiral Daala's renegades, and its captain, Fy'lyor, had been taken prisoner. Fy'lyor's fate was still a confused issue, and Syal could see the uncertainty on the old captain's craggy face.

Next to Vernetet was Mila Pavric, commander of the fleet carrier *Corusca Gem*. Pavric was tall Calibop, whose gold-and-red wings were arced behind her back, trailing feathers on the conference room's floor. Pavric's black eyes blinked as she glanced at Syal, but her avian face was unreadable.

Beside the Calibop was the Gamorrean. Voort "Piggy" SaBinring, commander of the special Wraith Squadron unit to which Myri belonged, had been one of their father's pilots in wars previous. When he looked at Syal she saw an expression on his wide green tusked face that, to most beings, would have been unreadable, but she could tell he was smiling.

After the Gamorrean was the Bothan. Traest Kre'fey had been the most famous admiral of the Yuuzhan Vong War, but political embarrassments and his siding with the separatists during the recent civil war had turned him into an odd figure, not Alliance yet its most senior officer here. He was presently serving as a military adviser aboard *Starless* and had been a mentor to the leader the renegade fleet, Bren Aref'ja.

Finally, there was Wynssa Fel, the human captain of the Chiss vessel *Celestial*. The commander's sister, Wynssa had abandoned the fleet once, only to reappear just in time to rescue Jagged and Myri as they escaped Daala's clutches. The severe blond woman didn't seem to pay Syal any attention at all; she and her brother were watching each other wordlessly, their expressions carefully guarded.

When Syal sat down, Jagged cleared his throat and said, "Welcome, all of you. I'm glad you could be aboard on such short notice."

Everyone nodded acknowledgement. Syal was worried, having all the senior captains in one place, but apparently Fel thought the risk of another ambush was less than the risk of inter-ship communications being intercepted.

Jagged Fel kept his eye dead forward, on all of them and none of them, as he summarized the situation. He reported that the task force's three Jedi had gone to the surface of Zonama Sekot and made contact. The planet was allowing unarmed ships only to land. Fel gave a brief summary of what had happened, and the equipment and supervision Zonama Sekot needed to repair its important infrastructure. Therefore, recovery teams would be prioritized during the first round of landings.

When he opened to questions, Pavric raised a wing. She said, "I assume most of the recovery crews will come from *Starless*. Should I keep my starfighters flying patrol?"

"Please," Jagged nodded. "I'd also like to keep a recon flight in the air. Right now, Captain Omphlem has *Andromeda*'s gravity wells online, effectively doubling the planet's mass shadow. If they try and sneak up on us, we should know they're coming and have time to prepare a defensive screen."

Wynssa raised a hand. After a tiny delay, Fel granted his sister a nod. The woman asked, "Which *they* are we speaking of, Commander? The renegade Yuuzhan Vong fleet, or Daala's?"

Kre'fey cleared his throat. "Aref'ja's main priority is to exterminate the Yuuzhan Vong. He is a clear-minded tactical thinker. He knows that, while the fleet is dangerous, Zonama Sekot is his ultimate target."

"Do you think he would attack the planet before clearing the fleet?" Voort asked. A slim silver vocoder around his fat neck translated his muted Gamorrean squeals into mechanical speech in Basic.

"Bren- Admiral Aref'ja would want to know his back is secure, but if he thought he could score a quick hit-and-run attack on the planet, I believe he would take it."

"And what about Admiral Daala?" Wynssa asked. "What would *she* do?"

Captain Vernet spoke up. "Admiral Daala specializes in doing the unexpected. We should remain vigilant."

"That's why we're on the lookout for an attack," Jagged Fel reminded them all. "The question is whether we're ready for a real fight. Captain Antilles, how are repairs on *Starless* coming along?"

"They're proceeding apace." Syal had talked to the repair crews on her comlink as she hurried to the meeting. "We suffered decompressions and fires on several decks, and lost a total of eighteen crew. However, *Starless* was designed with backups in case of damage. Shields and weapons are at ninety-percent normal capacity if it comes to a fight."

"Good." Fel glanced at his sister. "In what condition is *Celestial*?"

"One hundred percent," Wynssa said. Syal couldn't tell if she was bragging.

"*Our* preparedness may not matter," Pavric said bluntly. "We're not sitting over an ordinary planet. If we're attacked, either by the Vong or the renegades, what will Sekot do?"

It was the billion-credit question. All eyes went to Jagged Fel. The man shirked their gaze and said, "Jaina is trying to ascertain that now. According to her, the planet did not fight when it was attacked five years ago. We're not sure if the situation has changed."

"You mentioned they were with the Magister," Kre'fey said. "The Magister is an organizational figure. What about the planet itself? I've heard they can... speak with it directly."

"So I've been told." Jagged nodded. "According to Jaina they talked briefly with the planet. Hopefully they will do so again soon."

From his tone it was clear he didn't have the answers to their questions. Pavric pressed, "According to reports the planet has been a potent offensive weapon in the past. It might be reluctant to attack Yuuzhan Vong ships, since those are its children, after a fashion. But what about non-Vong ships? If Daala and Aref'ja attack, will it defend? And if it doesn't care about killing *them*, will it care if *we* get in the way?"

"I don't *know*," Fel said, betraying his frustration. "As I said, Jaina is on the ground now. Hopefully she can establish fuller communications and discern the planet's intent."

Kre'fey said, "We had to trust to that planet during the battle to retake Coruscant. I admit I was skeptical, but it came through for us in the end."

"Do you trust it now?" Wynssa asked. It was clear from her tone that she did not.

Kre'fey thought for a moment, then nodded. "I do. And frankly, our forces are depleted. If we *are* attacked, we may have to depend on Zonama Sekot's help."

Vernedet sighed. "There are too many unknowns for my liking."

"And mine," Wynssa looked at her brother. Their eyes locked and Syal thought some tension sparked between them. It was, surprisingly, Wynssa who looked away, as though she was ashamed.

Jagged turned his attention to the other captains. "I want to begin landing ships within the hour. Captain Vernedet, you're free to send one team of Imperial scientists down to the planet."

The old captain nodded thanks.

"And what of the Chiss?" Wynssa asked, surprisingly cautious. "Are *we* allowed to land?"

Jagged regarded his sister carefully. Syal felt a pity for them both. The gulf between her and Myri had been wide for most of their lives; the gulf between the Fel siblings thanks to Jagged's full decade of exile from Chiss society was unimaginably bigger.

"I believe you have a patient in your infirmary who wishes to come down to the planet," he said. "You may send two medical officers to accompany him. They'll be screened upon arrival."

Wynssa nodded wordlessly.

"All right," Fel said, "Captains, you may return to your ships. I'd like the personnel from *Starless* to stay on for further briefing."

It took less than a minute for Wynssa, Vernedet, and Pavric to file out, leaving Syal, Voort, and Kre'fey to discuss issues with Jagged. They spent another ten minutes discussing deployment

to the planet; specifically, which personnel and equipment to send down. With that done, Fel dismissed them.

"He looks awful," Voort said as they walked down the hall.

"The poor man's been through hell in the space of a day," Kre'fey said. "I hope he gets some rest, though I doubt he will."

"We could all use it," Syal said, feeling suddenly tired. She tried to remember the last time she'd had real sleep. It must have been two days ago, which was bad enough, but those two days had been full of deadly ambushes and desperate battles. Two days felt like forever.

Weariness overtook her suddenly. Her vision swam and she stumbled forward. Voort reached out and grabbed her shoulder with a meaty hand, pulling her upright.

"Are you okay?" he grunted. She could see the concern in his little bovine eyes.

"I just need some sleep." Syal brushed bronze hair out of her face. "Badly."

"If you wish, captain, I could oversee the deployment of the first shuttle."

Syal shook her head. She was captain, he was just an advisor. It was her responsibility.

"Syal," Voort said, "You need rest."

"We'll take care of it, Captain," Kre'fey said, and she was surprised to see fatherly concern in the Bothan's violet eyes.

"Okay," Syal exhaled. "I'll hit the rack. Five hours. But if anything happens--"

"We'll rouse you from well-earned slumber," Voort said. "Now go get your beauty sleep, Captain."

It was, truth be told, easy to take their advice. It might not have been the mark of a proper captain, but her whole body was screaming for rest. So she shuffled down the hall, up the turbolift, down another hall, until she finally reached her quarters.

She walked in to see two women sprawled over her bed, giggling. One had short hair streaked with silvers and pinks. The other was taller, with sandy-blonde hair pulled up in a messy ponytail. They had a bottle open and the air reeked of Churban brandy.

"Sis!" Myri shot upright. "Back so soon?"

“Yes,” Syal sighed. “And I’m very tired.”

The other woman froze like an eopie in headlights. Then she flung her long legs off the bed, staggered, regained balance, and snapped a sloppy salute.

“Captain!” Jesmin Tainer said. “Um... You have very nice quarters, captain!”

Myri snickered and drank some more brandy.

“My quarters are boring,” Syal admitted. She started to unzip her uniform.

“So um.... any news?” Myri asked, cross-legged on her sister’s bed, brandy bottle between two clasped hands.

“We’re sending teams down to Zonama Sekot,” Syal said. “Including half of Wraith Squadron.”

Both young women looked suddenly sober. Syal took off her uniform jacket, draped it over her desk chair, and sat down. “I talked it over with Piggy. Myri, you’re staying on *Starless*.”

Her sister gave a small, satisfied nod. Jesmin, still on her feet, asked, “What about me?”

“You’ll be going down to the planet, along with Gorsat, Latt, Huhunna, and Bessarah. We thought you’d be the ones best suited to handle Yuuzhan Vong and Sekotan bio-tech.”

“Okay,” Jesmin said, and that was it.

It was Myri who said, “That should be really... interesting. Huh, Jezzies?”

“That’s a word for it,” Jesmin nodded.

Syal noticed the lightsaber dangling from her belt for the first time. That’s right, she was Force-sensitive. Daughter of an ex-Wraith and Jedi, and sister of Jedi too, but an academy drop-out herself.

Syal herself had no desire to visit this mysterious, living, Force-strong world. The thought of being surrounded by an invisible sentient being that could pry into your thoughts was beyond unsettling.

Jesmin looked like she didn’t know what to feel.

“So when do they roll out?” Myri asked on her behalf.

“First shuttle leaves in one hour, but it’s not the Wraiths,” Syal said. She felt like she was beginning to melt into the chair. “You’ve got four.”

"Oh, stang," Myri bounced off the bed and onto her feet next to Jesmin. Somehow she didn't spill anything; they must have downed most of the bottle already. "Come one, we've got to get you ready."

"Yeah," Jesmin blinked like she was in a daze. Then she snapped another salute and said, "Thank you, captain, sir!"

Syal stood up and waved them both to the door. Myri lunged forward and wrapped her sister in a one-armed hug as she held the brandy bottle in the other. Despite being the younger one, Myri was a few centimeters taller, and Syal's chin bumped awkwardly against her sister's shoulder.

Myri pulled back and snapped a mostly-formal salute next to Jesmin. Then they scampered out and the door hissed shut behind them. Syal stared at her bed, plush and tempting, and tried to find the strength to walk on over to the refresher for a shower.

Then she decided that was too hard, shuffled over to the bed, and let herself fall into soft oblivion.

Wynssa Fel felt great relief as her shuttle slid into the safe berth of *Celestial's* hangar. She had felt tense the entire time she'd been aboard *Starless*, and she was glad to be back where she belonged.

There was something strange in that, she admitted to herself as she and her escorts made their way from the hangar to the bridge. On the Alliance flagship, so many of the crewmen had been humans like herself. She was, however, far more comfortable when surrounded by blue-skinned, red-eyed stony-face Chiss. It was easy to see why; she'd been raised by Chiss, not humans. Still, rare encounters like this reminded her of how strange her upbringing had been, and it threatened to drive her to distraction.

Jagged in particular was a difficult problem. After his ten years of exile she'd more or less given up on ever seeing him again. She'd forced herself to stop wondering what he looked like now, how he acted. The Jagged she'd been reunited with on this mission was at once so like the older brother she'd emulated growing up and not like him at all.

It was a difficult paradox, and Wynssa didn't like to dwell on

those.

Thankfully, everything aboard the Chiss destroyer was organized and disciplined, orderly as it should be.

When she arrived on the bridge, she was immediately met by her first officer, who told her that fleet command had attempted to hail her just half a standard hour ago. Wynssa had sent a message to Csilla informing them that they'd arrived at Zonama Sekot, but had no direct conversation with her superiors since then.

She was glad to change that. She quickly gave instructions to ship the wounded Mandalorian down to the planet, and to send two medics with the order to glean as much information about the planet as they could and relay it back to *Celestial*. It wouldn't take long to tell whether Jagged's Jedi wife was telling them the truth about everything that was happening down on Zonama Sekot.

Once that was accomplished, she excused herself to her personal chambers aft of the bridge and put in an encrypted return call to Csilla. As she waited for a reply, she wondered if her father had called her directly. The possible resurgence of the Yuuzhan Vong threat had brought Soontir Fel out of retirement and back into the Ascendancy's complex military and political power structure. Perhaps inspired by his son's example, he'd started calling for more open engagement between the Chiss and the rest of the galaxy. Wynssa had been surprised at first, and remained a little skeptical of her father's policies; she'd gained plenty of firsthand experience in the complicated mess of inter-governmental coalitions.

To her slight disappointment, the face that sprung up on her holo-projector was not her father's. She looked at a Chiss woman with blankly glowing eyes and long black hair framing either side of a thin face.

Wynna snapped a stiff salute. "Wynssa Fel reporting, Admiral."

"At ease, Commodore," Krets'shawncyk'nuruodo nodded easily.

Her father had helped make sure that the admiral, informally called by her core name Shawncyk, was over-seeing this operation from fleet headquarters. She had gained plenty of

first-hand experience fighting the Yuuzhan Vong on the last war, when she'd flown her brother's wing on missions at Hapes and Borleias. Like Jagged and Wynssa, she had been raised and trained as part of Syndic Mit'thraw'nuruodo's Household Phalanx, and like them had joined the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet after Thrawn's Empire of the Hand largely merged with the mainline government. The fact that the Combined Houses had agreed to give Wynssa and Shawnkyr command of such a critical mission showed how much influence the former Empire of the Hand, and the Fel family, had recently gained in Chiss politics.

"Well," Shawnkyr began, "I understand you have discovered Zonama Sekot. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Admiral, though I admit it was Alliance operatives who traced the planet's location."

"Then we should be thankful for our allies. I understand you saved your brother as well."

"That is correct."

"*And*, you've sent us a shipful of Mandalorians in desperate need of our bio-engineering expertise."

"I apologize for the imposition, Admiral. Commander Fel made the promise to them, in exchange for his rescue from the enemy. There was no time to consult with you. I had to make the call to honor his decision on the spot."

Shawkyr tilted her head slightly. "There's no need to get defensive, Commodore. I'm glad they saved your brother. I remember him fondly."

"He is... somewhat damaged from his captivity, but he should be all right. Admiral, have the Mandalorians arrived yet?"

"Just before I called you," she nodded. "We have Fett and his people... secure."

"Do you think you can develop a counter to the nano-virus?"

"That's for our scientists to determine. *We* have different priorities."

"Of course, Admiral."

"What is your determination of the situation on the planet?" Shawnkyr's voice grew serious.

Wynssa thought a moment before replying. Before departing

on *Celestial* to join the rest of Trinity Fleet, Shawnkyr had given her the samples of Alpha Red and instructed her on the parameters for using the weapon. If they found Zonama Sekot had been overrun by Yuuzhan Vong fanatics bent on more conquest, she was to use it. If the planet's living consciousness had become a threat to Chiss interests, she was to use it. If they encountered an enemy fleet that was too powerful for them to overtake with convention arms, she was to use it.

Ultimately, though, whether they'd crossed into any of those situations had been left to Wynssa to determine.

"The hostile fleet is a renegade," she began. "The Yuuzhan Vong still on Zonama Sekot are peaceful. The world itself seems to present no threat."

Shawnkyr raised a black eyebrow. "Is this your first-hand estimation, of the Jedi's?"

"I've one of our teams to the planet's surface. They corroborate everything the Jedi have said."

It was hard to tell over the holo, but the admiral looked a little relieved. "What about the hostile fleet?"

"We've only skirmished with them briefly. Alliance and Imperial renegades have been causing more trouble."

"Yes, I've read your reports. Thoroughly."

After a pause, Wynssa said, "Admiral, we've lost several key capital ships already."

"Do you have a request, Commodore?"

Wynssa knew better than to expect reinforcements from the Houses, especially when they'd only been willing to send one destroyer on this mission, but she had to ask. It could mean the difference between life and death for her, her crew, and her brother.

"You have our location," she said. "It seems Zonama Sekot's hyperdrive core is currently down, so we won't be moving soon. If the CEDF is willing to send any assistance, it would be appreciated."

Shawnkyr made a thoughtful, humming sound. "Sending more ships into a combat situation outside our territory could be considered an act of preemptive hostilities."

Preemptive strikes were considered dishonorable for most Chiss. Wynssa knew that. She also knew that, as a member of

Mit'thraw'nuruodo's clan, the admiral was especially conscious about not taking an offensive posture, so as not to fall into disfavor and exile like the grand admiral had.

"Sir," Wynssa said, "In rescuing my brother, *Celestial* had a direct engagement with a Yuuzhan Vong frigate. Damage was dealt on both sides. We're still conducting repairs and tending to casualties."

Shawnkyr did not look moved, but then, she rarely did. "I don't think that will be sufficient. Most of the CEDF leadership is proud of sitting out the last Yuuzhan Vong war."

"If we stop the Yuuzhan Vong here, at Zonama Sekot, there won't be another one. We can make sure of that."

"I'm not unsympathetic to your point, Commodore. Believe me. I even..." Shawnkyr paused, considered her words. "I would feel personally responsible if anything happened to you. Or Jagged."

It took Wynssa a stunned moment to realize her jaw had dropped open. She snapped it shut and said, "Will you at least relay this request to my father?"

"I most definitely will. I suspect he'll be in its favor."

"Thank you, Admiral."

Shawnkyr tilted her chin upward. "Is there anything else?"

"At the moment, I don't think there is."

"Very well. We shall contact you again, Commodore."

"Yes, sir," Wynssa said, and snapped a salute.

The holo winked to nothing, leaving her alone in her cabin. She stared at the dim projector, unmoving. The admiral's admission of affection for her and Jagged had stunned her. Shawnkyr had been a trusted ally of the Fel family, even when her brother's actions had cast them into dishonor, but like all Chiss, honest emotion was something she showed rarely.

Wynssa certainly hadn't expected to receive it now.

When she'd taken *Celestial* into the red nebula, she'd told herself and her crew that they'd been acting not out of sentiment, but to preserve Trinity Fleet. At the time she'd almost believed it, but now, in the following calm, she had to admit that her motivations were personal. It was unbecoming an officer to risk her ship to save one man, even if that man was her brother, but she'd done it anyway. She should have felt

ashamed of that, confessed it to Shawnkyr, maybe asked to be relieved of duty because she'd lost her objectivity.

She should have felt ashamed, but she didn't.

It was a strange place to be in. It caused her mind and heart to tug in different directions and she hated it. She turned and stalked out of her cabin, determined to find another way to occupy her thoughts, something logical and straight-forward. She was sure she'd find something.

Wraith Squadron's ready-room in *Starless* wasn't much bigger than a closet, and the flight deck was still busy with ships getting refitted and repaired after the fight in the nebula, so the Wraiths had their one last briefing in the barracks. It was a cramped space too: one narrow room with three bunk-bed sets along either wall and a long bench running down the middle.

Myri Antilles, still a little wobbly-legged from the Churban brandy Jesmin had found somewhere, sat on a second-level bunk that Sharr Latt, the Wraiths' executive officer in her absence, had said was now hers. Her legs dangled off the edge as she looked down at the others. Voort (alternately, 'Uncle Piggy') seemed to take up one whole end of the room, and the Wraith's big furry Wookie mechanic Huhunnah the other. Between them, white-haired Sharr sat on the end of the bench near Piggy, while human demo expert Trey Courser and Clawdite shape-shifter Turman Durra traded banter in the middle and Drikall Bessarrah, their red-skinned Devaronian medic, sat next to Huhunnah.

Meanwhile, Jesmin sat in the bunk just below Myri, off to one side so she didn't get knocked in the head by Myri's swinging boots. Sharpshooter Wran Narcassan sat on the high bunk across from Myri, demonstrative flight maneuvers with his hands to comm expert Thaymes Fodrick.

Finally, sitting on the lower bunk near Piggy, was Viull "Scut" Gorsat. He wasn't bothering with his usual neoglith masquer, and his gray, unscarred Yuuzhan Vong face looked distant and pensive.

Voort was talking to someone on the comlink, but once he was done, he pocketed the device and stamped one heavy foot

on the deck. That was enough to rattle and room and get everyone's attention.

"Okay," the Gamorrean said in that mechanical voice that translated his natural squeaks and squeals, "The shuttle to Zonama Sekot's prepped and ready to go. They go dirtside in twenty minutes."

Sober silence settled over the group, Myri most of all. Her sudden liberation, escape, and reunion not only with the Wraiths but her sister had been a crazy whirlwind. She was still giddy, not just from the booze and from being alive, but from seeing all these people, some of whom had come to mean a lot to her without her realizing it. She had no idea how much she'd missed Drikall's toothy grin or Thaymes' forced jokes until stumbling onto *Starless* after that breathtaking escape from Aref'ja's flagship.

And now they were splitting up again.

"You all know the score," Voort continued. "Smarty, you're in charge of the ground team. Ranger, Scut, Healer, and Climber are all yours."

Sharr nodded seriously. "I'll take care of 'em, Lead."

Sharr and Piggy were the two oldest in the squad, veterans of the Vong war and other stuff besides, and Myri could sense the unspoken promise pass between them. Daala and True Victory were still out there; so was the rogue Vong fleet.

This goodbye could be for a few days or forever. They'd left all certainty behind.

Tension passed in a moment. Drikall said, "Hey, nobody steal my stuff when I'm gone, okay? That mean *you*, Thaymes."

Wran, Trey, and Turman laughed and Thaymes feigned shock. Pressing a hand to his breast he said, "Hey, when have I ever done anything like that?"

Wran elbowed him in the side. "C'mon, Talker, we all know you've been sneaking pills."

"Oh, please," Thaymes rolled his eyes. "You should talk. You-"

Voort stomped his foot again, shutting them all up. He said, "Like I told you, Sekot doesn't want us to bring any guns on the planet, so any weapons we *do* bring stay on the shuttle, under guard, for emergency *only*."

From beneath Myri, Jesmin asked, “What about my lightsaber?”

“We have three Jedi down there already,” Voort said, “So it should be fine.”

“I hope we don’t need it,” Drikall said.

“You shouldn’t. Your main goals are to fix the hyperdrive systems in case we need them. Scut, you know Vong biotech and Huhunna, you know engines, so you two should have your work cut out for you.”

Myri raised a hand. “What happens to the rest of us?”

“*Starless* needs her comm and nav systems fixed after the last fight. Talker, you’re taking point on that.”

Thaymes nodded seriously.

Wran asked, “Any more scout missions?”

“Not right now. We have other squads flying cap along the edge of the gravity well, so your StealthX fighters are on cool standby. If we need them, we can warm them up quick.”

“Here’s hoping we *don’t*,” said Turman, and Huhunna roared agreement.

Piggy didn’t bother trying to sell false confidence. He said, “I just gave Smarty a schedule for regular check-ins with *Starless*. Even if we’re splitting up, we’ll still work as a team and do everything we can to help each other.”

“Sounds good to me.” Myri said.

Sharr glanced at his wrist-chrono and said, “Time to go, ground team. Everyone got their things?”

Huhunnah grunted. Jesmin voiced agreement and Drikall slapped the heavy bag sitting next to him on the bench.

Sharr looked at the unresponsive Yuuzhan Vong. “What about you, Scut? You good to go?”

There was an awkward moment when everyone watched Scut in silence, knowing that he was seeing his race’s home for the first time, knowing, too, that they could never understand everything that must have been going through his head.

Then Scut straightened, nodded, and said, “Good to go, sir.”

“Great.” Sharr clapped his hands and stood.

Everyone else started moving too. Carefully, as gracefully as she could with all that brandy still swimming around, Myri clambered down to the deck next to Jesmin, who was throwing

a heavy bag over her back.

The two women swung to face each other. Myri blinked; so did Jesmin.

Myri smiled awkwardly. "A little unfair, isn't it? Not much of a reunion."

Jesmin reached out, touched her arm. "You're still up here with your sister. That's important."

"And you're getting to see Zonama Sekot," Myri said simply.

Jesmin nodded wordlessly. All she could have said was written over her face. She'd spent her whole life as the daughter and sister of a Jedi, but despite her Academy training she'd never been able to hack it herself. She did a good job of hiding it, but Myri knew that failure had always gnawed at her friend.

But on Zonama Sekot, so they said, the Force was different than other places, stronger. It might open things up for Jesmin in new ways, potentially exciting or dangerous, or it might not open up anything at all. Myri didn't know what option Jesmin was hoping for; she didn't seem to know herself.

Best she could, Myri pulled the blond woman in for a hug and patted her lower back. "Good luck down there, Jezzie."

"Good luck up here," Jesmin muttered into the side of her head.

Beside them, Huhunna roared something along the lines of "Good lucky to everyone and let's get going before that shuttle leaves without us."

Jesmin stepped away, gave Myri's arm one more squeeze, and followed the Wookiee out of the barracks. Suddenly the cramped space seemed a lot more open. Myri had never allowed herself to think of Wraith Squadron as her family, but right then, it felt like half of everyone who mattered had just walked out of the room, leaving the rest behind to yet another uncertain future.

She prayed they came back soon.

Chapter 3

There had always been an inside and an outside. *Kad'ika* to his family, the ones within. Venku to those without. It had been easy to know who his friends were and who were *aruetisse*; not enemies per say, but outsiders, and therefore potential enemies, never to be trusted. He had spent most of his life trying to forge the tighter bond between those inside. Those outside could fend for themselves, be they Imps, Vong, Jedi, or Boba Fett.

But even on the inside, things hadn't been right.

He would never forget the look on Kal Skirata's face any time the old *Mando* drill sergeant looked in his direction. Short, craggy, perpetually encased in battered gold chestplate and shoulder pads that made him look like a charging ronto, Skirata had been a father and grandfather to sprawling family of Mandalorian warriors. Mereel and Jaing still reserved the word *buir* solely for him. They all loved him, and he'd loved them back.

But when he looked at the child *Kad'ika* you could see the pain inside, the pain that truly kept him from loving the child born of Jedi Knight and clone trooper. *Kal'ba'buir* had used the pain as a barrier, and young Venku had tried so hard to break through that shield and know and love the man like the rest of his clan did. He didn't have that problem with the rest of them, and he couldn't understand what had turned *Kal'ba'buir* against him. It had caused him great pain as a child.

Then, one day when he was still a child to the rest of the galaxy but a young warrior to his *Mandos*, the ex-Jedi calling himself Gotab had taken Venku for a long walk through the woods outside Kyrimorut. He'd explained everything.

Venku had known that his parents were dead. He knew that his father was a clone; he could see his resemblance to Fi, Ordo, Jaing, and the rest in the mirror. When he'd asked about his mother the others had gone strangely evasive.

Finally, Gotab took him out to tell him.

When he learned that Etain had been a Jedi, young Venku's first thought had been: *That makes sense*. He'd already sensed there was something different about himself. He could sometimes sense the thoughts and feelings of the other boys and girls, and sometimes expected things before they happened.

Gotab explained that his mother had been a Jedi, killed saving clones during Order 66. Then he explained that his father had been killed by a fellow clone, Niner, because he had exposed a secret operation to save fugitive Jedi and gotten brothers killed.

Venku's first response had been anger. Why did his father have to die to save a few Jedi? Why did *he* have to have Jedi powers? He'd spent his whole young life listening to other *Mandos*, Gotab included, bad-talk the Jedi as arrogant, self-righteous, manipulative religious nut-jobs. He said as much to Gotab. He *remembered* the ex-Jedi saying as much, specifically. With far more gravity than a normal ten-year-old, gravity he carried with him for the rest of his life, he'd asked: "Why did *Kal'ba'buir* kill my father to save a bunch of Jedi?"

Gotab (still with a smooth face and rich blonde hair then) had shaken his head and said, "Darman didn't just turn against the Jedi. He turned against *us*. He was *dar'manda*."

Dar'manda, no longer *Mando*, detached forever from the culture that had birthed him. Venku still didn't know what bitter prophecy had forced Kal Skirata to give that name to his father, of all the clones he'd trained.

Maybe, deep down, *Kal'ba'buir* had possessed a touch of the Force too.

How he would have hated that.

Smiling sadly, Gotab had reached into his kit and taken out two shiny metal cylinders. Venku knew what they were; Gotab himself wore one around his belt, and a few other *Mandos* went around with lightsabers as trophies.

"These were Etain's," he'd said. "And now they're yours."

Then he'd placed the weapons in the boy's small hands. They were cold and heavy, but he felt like he'd always know them.

He remembered the feel of cold metal against his palms. He remembered the way light fell through the trees. He remembered the way the leaves rustled, a long time ago.

Fifty long years gone.

He opened his eyes and was surrounded by life.

He was lying on the ground. Light fell through branches above him. They had shimmering, rainbow leaves like nothing Venku had ever seen. He was out of his armor. A cold wind blew over his face and through his clothes.

There were people around him. He made out Gotab first: not the Gotab he'd just dreamed of, but the Gotab of more than a half-century later: face wrinkled and sagging, hair brittle and gray, eyes so very old. Next to him, another ancient, one with a messy beard and long braided hair to camouflage a weathered version of the face that had once been behind five million white helmets on a thousand different worlds. Mereel Skirata.

On his other side, the faces of youth. One was like a vision of the past, slightly bleached: Jendri Skirata had the face of his grandfather Ordo, but his eyes and skin were lighter. To his side, his sister Bess, her long dark hair tied in a ponytail while she leaned forward, blue eyes blazing with curiosity against her round, smooth-featured face.

"It's all right." Gotab placed a hand on his shoulder. His motion was gentle but the hand seemed to weigh twenty kilos.

"Where... Where are we?" Venku croaked. His mouth was dry. It felt like his lips would split open.

"This is Zonama Sekot," Gotab said.

"The *vongesse* world?" Alarm spiked in his addled brain.

"The same." Gotab nodded. He was channeling calm through the Force.

"What's the last thing you remember, *Kad'ika*?" Mereel asked.

He tried to search his memory. He thought of white corridors. Stormtroopers in armor like his father's, but different. A small woman with long dark hair, hunched on the bunk of her private cell, shouting at him in twisted agony.

"Solo," Venku muttered. "Jedi Solo. On... *Chimaera*."

"You took a hit on the head busting her out," Mereel said. "The machines couldn't wake you up. Neither could *Bard'ika*."

"Solo suggested I take you here," said Gotab. "She thought the Force would be stronger here, that I could heal you."

Venku tried to sit up, but his head swam with the slightest motion. His legs were weak and his arms weaker. He hadn't felt this broken, this helpless in his life, and for a *Mando* nothing was worse than feeling helpless.

"Just rest," Gotab said. "I can try and help you further."

"Where are the others?" Venku asked.

"We lost a few busting Solo and Fel out of captivity," Mereel said. "We lost Jaller. Kip. Londo. Farr."

Venku tried to count the loss. He's known all of their parents growing up. They were all *inside* people. "And... the rest?"

"Went off with Fett to see the Chiss about an antidote," Mereel said. "Time will *shabla* tell if it works, but... We could be going home."

Home. The thought gave Venku a surge of joy. It had been four years, four long and awful years since their emergency evacuation of Mandalore after the Imperial Moff's dumped a nano-killer into the planet's atmosphere that targeted Jango Fett's genes. Since then, Clan Skirata had wandered the stars, and Boba Fett, slowly growing into his role as *Mand'alor* at last, had commanded his troops *in absentia*, relying on Goran Beviin to act as his planetside proxy.

The Moff's strike had been a bitter blow not just to the Skiratas, but to the resurgent Mandalorian people. Venku had yearned for return, lusted for it, not just for his *Mando'ade* but for himself as well. Now it might be in their grasp.

But it might not, too. The Chiss might fail. Zonama Sekot might get destroyed by crazed fanatics in an hour. Venku had no way of knowing, no way of doing anything. He couldn't even get up.

"Just rest for now, *ba'buir*," Bess said softly. "*Bard'ika* will help you heal."

"Close your eyes. Calm yourself," the old ex-Jedi said. "Stretch out and touch this world. Feel the life around you, draw strength from it."

“It's just... just a forest.”

Gotab shook his head. “No. I think it's much more than that.”

Venku closed his eyes and tried to forget his million new worries. He regulated his breathing and tried to feel his own body in the Force, organs and blood vessels and bones, the way Gotab had taught him. For Gotab, and thus for Venku, the Force was not just a way to perform cheap tricks like opening a jar of caf with no hands. It wasn't just a way to screw with other beings' minds either. The Force was an engineering tool you could use to examine and perfect the systems within you and without.

Right now he was having trouble making sense of the mess inside him, so he turned his attention to his surroundings.

Veku had always valued strict delineations, *Mando* versus *aruetisse*, us versus them. He was never comfortable reaching toward a Unifying Force. Frankly, he'd never gotten much out of it when he'd tried. But because there was nothing else he could do, he tried now.

He was surprised by what he found.

He could sense so much life. Trees, moss, grass, weeds, insects, tiny mammals scampering through the brush and bird flitting through the trees. He sensed the rawness of the nature, the kind he felt in the forests outside Kyrimorut, he he sensed... something more too. This was raw and natural but it was *not* chaotic.

It seemed like the entire natural order of Zonama Sekot, harsh and cruel as it often was, contained some deep inner equilibrium, some source of stability and sanity and purpose he could hardly fathom.

Lost in himself and the mystery of Zonama Sekot, he slipped outside time. He had no idea how much passed; an hour or a day. When he opened his eyes the sun was slanting at a sharper angle through the trees. Jendri and Bess were gone. So were Mereel and Gotab. Sitting to one side, watching him with guarded curiosity, was a small woman in a green-and-brown camo jumpsuit, her dark hair tied at the back of her neck. A lightsaber dangled from her utility belt.

“Nice outfit” he grunted. “Looks better than those fancy *Jetii* robes. More practical.”

"Hi yourself," Jaina Solo said. "I heard you woke up."

Venku tried to sit up this time. He tried to shuffle his legs and didn't have the strength for it, but he managed to prop himself up on his elbows, giving him a better view of Jaina and the forest in which he lay.

"You're welcome, by the way," Jaina said. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Very weak," Venku said. "I was... hit in the head?"

"You were in a coma. I thought Gotab might be able to heal you here. Looks like I was right."

"Thank you," he rasped. "I just... I'm surprised by this place."

"Are you?" Jaina said curiously. "What did you expect from Zonama Sekot?"

"Nothing. I'd heard the stories but... I didn't know what to think of it."

"It feels different in the Force, doesn't it?"

"Different from a normal forest. Unified, somehow. I've heard this world has... thoughts of its own."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Have you... contacted this... planetary mind?"

"Just a little," Jaina said guardedly. "It's permitted some shuttles to come down, including the medical one that brought you here. This planet's been alone and damaged for a long time, and we're trying to repair it."

"But... Daala, and the Vong fleet..."

"Still out there."

"Then we may have to fight."

"Sekot has... complicated ideas about fighting. But I know I wouldn't mind having four *Mandos* by my side."

Venku had to smile at that, a very tired smile. "I never thought I'd hear a Jedi say that."

"I'm not a typical Jedi," Jaina said. She leaned forward a little. "And right now, we need all the help we can get."

"I can... try to provide it. I owe you a debt."

"You saved my life, I saved yours. Let's call it even."

"Okay. We will."

Jaina nodded. She seemed satisfied with that, but also distracted. Venku asked, "What is it?"

The Jedi shook her head. "I don't know. I was here a long time ago. Fifteen years. It feels like... forever and no time at all. So much has changed, for me and the galaxy and Sekot, and yet..."

"Did you talk to *Bard'ika* about this place?"

"I did," she nodded. "He can feel something special here in the Force. He admits it. The others three, they just think it's a barren wilderness, but Gotab knows different. And so do you."

"I feel... uncomfortable here."

"So does Gotab. He's spent a long life trying to push the Force away and forget what it was like to be a Jedi. Now the Force is here, and it's too strong to deny, and he doesn't know what to do."

Yes, thought Venku. That sounded exactly right. He wanted to forget about this living world, this life-rich forest. He wanted to put on his armor and go back to being a *Mando* again, the kind of *Mando* he'd been all his life, a brave warrior who fought for and with the people he loved.

He wasn't sure if Zonama Sekot was going to let him *be* a *Mando* any longer. He felt like it was pulling him toward something else.

Jaina sensed his discomfort. She said, "Gotab stepped out to get food. He'll be back soon to help you heal. You can heal yourself too, if you drop into a trance."

"I... never learned. I've... touched the Force here. I don't know how to use it to heal."

"That's fine." A smile formed on her face. "Lay down and I'll help you the best I can."

Laying down was not something a *Mando* did. A *Mando* was always on his feet, always alert, always ready to fight.

In theory, anyway.

Right now it seemed like he didn't have any other options, so he lowered himself to the ground so he lay face-up, crossed his hands on his abdomen, and closed his eyes.

"All right," he muttered words he never had before, "Teach me how to heal."

The newcomers from the fleet didn't have to set down in the middle of an empty field, chat with a living world, and ride on

top of giant lizard-things to get to civilization. Instead, they got to land at the prepared spaceport at the largest settlement in the Middle Distance.

Ben was still reluctant to call it a city. Maybe it was the Corsucanti in him. It was a village, maybe, or at town at best. It sat along a winding river, and its low dome-like organic buildings clung like natural growths to the undulating hills. On a clear day like this, the sun gleamed off their smooth surface, giving the town a luminous, slightly surreal feeling.

The people of the town, or at least the ones who crowded around the hilltop landing field to get a good look at the arriving shuttles, were mostly blue-skinned Ferroans. Danni Quee had explained that the Yuuzhan Vong had mostly been settled in smaller camps littered across the planet. Many had been sent to the lower hemisphere to help the process of rebuilding the ecosystem of the damaged continents. The shaper caste had proven quite helpful in this, she said, while the soldiers, laborers, and extolled, formerly known as Shamed Ones, had proven adept at farming, as long as they put aside their differences. Which, apparently, was not an easy thing.

Ben and Tahiri stood on the far side of the landing field, watching another shuttle unload. Several had already set down, including the one from the Chiss cruiser. This current one looked to be from *Vindicator*, the Imperial flagship. Its staff, dressed in typically drab Imperial olive-gray uniforms, stepped out onto the planet's surface with mild hesitation. They craned their necks at the sky and scanned the short-cut grass of the landing field, like they were expecting something weird to pop up and surprise them.

Ben didn't begrudge them. He felt pretty weird himself.

"I'm surprised Sekot allowed this many to land," Tahiri said. Like Ben, she had her arms crossed over his chest and was leaning against a waist-high wood-cut fence.

"They're not armed," Ben pointed out.

"Not the ships, but some of the people are. Those *Mandos*, for instance."

"Yeah," Ben grunted. There were only five of them. Two of them were old men and one was getting out of a coma. Still, he didn't like having them around.

"How do you know Sekot allowed them?" Ben asked. "I mean, Danni and Jaina just sort of *agreed* to take them in... The planet didn't say anything."

"You only land on this planet if Sekot lets you," Tahiri said with finality.

"We've only talked to Sekot once. Danni hasn't in months," Ben pointed out. "Maybe something's... wrong with it."

There was a small crack in Tahiri's sure expression. "The planet feels like it always has. *Exactly* like it has. I'm sure Sekot has a good reason for its silence."

Ben wasn't sure if Tahiri believed that or not. He certainly didn't, but he saw no point in arguing about things they couldn't control.

"How's it looking?" a voice asked from behind them. They turned in unison to see Jaina walking toward them across the short grass.

"The Imperials are unloading their people," Tahiri said. "Did you check on the *Mando*?"

"He's getting better," Jaina said. She glanced at Ben. "Are you hanging in there?"

Ben wasn't sure what she meant by that. Was he getting used to Zonama Sekot? Was he over the fact that both she and his father had hidden the fact of Vestara's return, apparently because they wanted to coddle him like a child, even after all he'd been through? The answer to both questions was a resounding *no*, but he didn't want to get in to that right now, so he simply muttered, "I'm fine."

Jaina nodded, like that was enough, and looked back at Tahiri. "Are you waiting for something?"

"One more arrival," the blonde woman said.

Jaina frowned. "The Chiss already came down, and the engineers from *Starless*. And the people from Wraith Squadron aren't due for a few hours."

"Not from the fleet," Tahiri said.

"Old friends?"

Tahiri tilted her head, considering. "You could say that. Speaking of old friends, where's Danni?"

"Meeting with some of the engineers. They're heading out to the hyperdrives soon. I was planning to go with them."

"Well, you are the mechanic."

"Yeah, but I've never tried to fix engines big enough to move an entire *planet*," Jaina put her hands on her hips. "If anybody else wants to come they're welcome. We're taking an airship, which should be interesting. We leave in an hour."

"Have fun," Ben grunted.

Jaina hid the frown in her eyes and nodded. "Sure. I should only be gone for a day or so. There's a comm there you can reach me on if you need to."

"Is Danni staying here?" Tahiri asked.

Jaina nodded.

"Good. There's some things I want to talk to her about."

Those *things* could have covered any myriad of topics, but somehow Ben knew what she meant. Someone had to tell Danni what had happened to Jacen and Mara. She deserved to know.

"Thank you," Jaina said. She understood too.

Tahiri nodded wordlessly. Jaina waved goodbye to her, and to Ben, and walked across the landing field toward the broad, balloon-like Sekotan airship tethered on the far side.

Tahiri and Ben leaned on the fence in silence for a long time. Wind blew, rustling his hair and filling his nose with the smell of damp grass.

Finally, Tahiri asked, "Are you going to tell me what *that* was all about?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Ben, come on," Tahiri rolled her eyes. "It's *me*."

She had a point. They'd been running missions for over a year now, and had come to form an effective team. What's more, Ben had arrested Tahiri's fall to the dark side under Darth Caedus. Their trust was implicit, or had been.

Ben sighed. "During the battle, when we rescued Jaina, we were attacked by some Yuuzhan Vong ships. With Sith aboard."

"I know that," Tahiri said.

"Not just any Sith. *Vestara* was onboard. I felt her."

"Oh."

"Yeah," Ben nodded. "*Oh*."

"I'm sorry. I just, well, don't know what to say."

"Jaina knew. She fought Vestara on Yavin 4. She told Dad and they agreed not to tell me. Because they didn't think I could *handle* it."

He scowled and kicked the ground, leaving brown scuff marks in the turf.

Tahiri blew out a breath. "Well... Now what?"

Ben blinked. "Now what what?"

"*Now what?*" Tahiri repeated. "You're mad because Jaina and your dad coddled you. You hate that, because you've been coddled in the past and you hated it then too. But what's done is done. *Now what?* What happens when Vestara comes back?"

Ben stared at the dirty cuts he'd made in the grass. Being mad at Jaina and Dad meant he didn't have to think about that question. Maybe that was *why* he was still mad.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Vestara's a *Sith*. She's been one since she was a kid. Nothing good's going to come out of her. I thought it could. I *trusted* her. I—"

"You loved her," Tahiri said simply.

"No I didn't," Ben shook his head. "I got suckered. I got stuck working with a pretty girl and I let my hormones get me in over my head."

"Ben," she said firmly. "I was younger than that when Anakin died. It wasn't 'just hormones' for me. I don't think it was for you either."

"What difference does it make?" Ben snapped. "I got soft. I let her into my head. I told her Jedi secrets. It's my mess and I have to clean it up."

"Do you mean kill her?"

That was it, the issue that had been dancing around in his mind since Vestara touched him in the Force. Longer, really. Probably since he realized she'd betrayed him.

"It could be necessary. I thought I could redeem her once and I was wrong."

Tahiri asked, "Was it necessary for Jaina to kill Jacen?"

"That wasn't Jacen," Ben snapped. "That was Caedus. A crazy Sith Lord who had to be taken down."

"You can call him whatever you want. I don't think names were ever really important to him. At least, he didn't like being *defined* by them."

"Okay, whatever. But yes, Jaina had to do it."

"And your mother? Did she *have* to try and kill Jacen?"

Ben flinched. He looked at her with anger in his eyes. She met it with cool green dispassion.

"Killing what you love is never easy," Tahiri said softly. "Your mom lost her life. Jaina lost... something neither of us can ever understand. Even your dad killed Lumiya, and he lost something of himself too. Once you do it, you can never get that something back."

"So what should I do? Try to redeem her, *again*?"

"I don't have an answer," Tahiri admitted.

"Yeah," Ben grunted and kicked the ground again. "Me neither."

Silence lingered between them again. Tahiri scanned the sky, still expectant. There was nothing but pale, crystal-clear blue. It was so much more peaceful than the skies of Coruscant, but didn't help Ben feel calm inside.

Eventually Tahiri asked, "What about that girl from Tosche Station?"

"Huh?"

"You know, the one who stole your lightsaber. Want to redeem her? She's probably still out there too. Jaina said she saw her in *Chimaera*."

"No. No no no," Ben shook his head. "I've had enough of girls with daddy issues who hate Jedi. I'm not getting involved."

"Yeah," Tahiri nodded. "Probably a good idea."

"Still," he admitted, "I would like my lightsaber back."

She glanced at the silver cylinder hanging from his belt. "Who does that belong to again?"

"It was Mom's," he said softly. "I haven't even turned it on yet."

A part of him didn't want to either. It scared him.

Before Tahiri could say anything, they heard the sound of an approaching aircraft. Both looked up in time to see a sleek vessel pass overhead. It was about the size of the other shuttles, but possessed two swept-back wings protruding from a narrow hull. Its green hull was all gentle curves, without a right angle to be seen. It was one of those Sekotan ships, clearly, though it

looked different from the starships Ben had seen. It might have been an atmosphere-only craft. Whatever it was, it had slowed down, extended four landing struts that looked like insect legs, and was setting down in an open space in the field.

Tahiri hopped off the fence and bounded toward it. Ben, surprised by her eagerness, gave a mental shrug and followed, though at a slower pace.

Tahiri reached the ship ahead of him, naturally. She was standing at attention when the hatch at its top slid back and people began to emerge. They descended the mobile staircase several Ferroan crew had wheeled over. As he got closer, Ben saw several Ferroans, followed by a pair of Yuuzhan Vong, young, without any scars. They wore long robes and had turban-like headresses piled on top of their hairless skulls.

Following them was another Vong with the same type of outfit. He was thin, almost skeletal, and moved slowly, keeping one hand on the stairway's railing at all times. He must have been very old.

When the old one reached the ground, Tahiri bounded forward. The two younger Vong looked a little alarmed, but the old one spread his arms wide as the small blond woman collided with his chest. Ben was afraid she was going to knock him back, but he held his ground and wrapped his arms around her shoulders in fond embrace.

The two young Yuuzhan Vong looked very confused. Ben knew the feeling.

By the time Tahiri and this old Vong stepped apart, Ben was right at their side. He cleared his throat and said, "Well, it's, um, nice to meet a friend of Tahiri."

The old Vong looked at him for the first time. His dark eyes, set deep in his skull, were impossible to read. The teeth in his lipless mouth were needle-like and fearsome. Ben tried to think of another time he'd been this close to a Yuuzhan Vong, failed, and felt very nervous.

Tahiri brushed some hair out of her face and said, "Ben, this is Harrar, the High Priest of the Yuuzhan Vong. Harrar, meet Ben Skywalker."

The name was dimly familiar to Ben, and his own was apparently familiar to Harrar. The old priest nodded and

extended a bony hand. "Welcome back to Zonama Sekot, son of Skywalker."

Ben reached out, took it. Harrar had a tough grasp and he was glad to take his hand away. "Let me guess, you last saw me when I was a baby."

"That's right," Harrar nodded. "How did you know?"

"It's been a pattern lately. But, um, thank you."

"Is your father well?"

"He's doing great, all things considered." Before getting a question about his mother, Ben gestured to the two younger Yuuzhan Vong and asked, "So, are these your, ah, fellow priests? Assistants?"

"These are my acolytes, Talar and Vershan." Harrar said. Ben exchanged awkward nods with both of them. The old priest turned his attention back to Ben and Tahiri. "So tell me. I have heard you have spoken to Sekot."

"Only briefly," Tahiri said. "We haven't seen it since. At least, I don't think we have."

"Sekot is still mysterious," Harrar nodded. "Recent events have been very... trying for it."

"They've been hard for us all," Ben said.

"Of course, of course," Harrar nodded. "Come, let us find some place to sit down."

As they stared for the hangars at the far side of the landing field, Tahiri offer Harrar an arm. The old priest shook his head and held out his hand, the same one he'd just offered Ben. In a flash, something whip-like extended from his wrist and snapped into a straight line. Harrar planted it on the floor like a cane, and started hobbling toward the hangar.

It took certain effort for Ben not to shudder. Tahiri just watched him with a bemused expression that said *Welcome to Zonama Sekot!*

She, at least, seemed to be enjoying herself.

Tahiri walked on Harrar's left, Ben on his right. The two acolytes trailed behind them, just out of hearing range. As they walked, Harrar said, "I have heard that Jaina Solo is also with you."

"She's about to set out for the hyperdrives," Tahiri said. "We've got a team that should be able to fix them."

"Perhaps. In the end they will only work if Sekot wills it," Harrar said. He didn't seem particularly worried, and Ben wasn't sure of that was suspicious or if Vong High Priests just faced problems with a Jedi-like calm. When they weren't sacrificing thousands of beings to their bloody gods, of course. He wondered how many this bony old priest had sacrificed. He wondered how much blood was on the hand he'd just shaken.

He wondered if redemption came easier to those not gifted, or burdened, with the Force.

"Now tell me, Riina Kwaad," Harrar said, "How did you find Zonama Sekot after we went missing for so long?"

"Oh, it's not a big deal," Tahiri said cheerily. "We already did it once, after all..."

As their shuttle breached the cloud-layer and banked low over the planet's surface, Jesmin Tainer leaned in so close her forehead trapped against the cool transparisteel as she watched it all swell up below: the crooked rivers, the broad plains, the low rolling mountains covered in an endless carpet of multi-colored bora trees.

"Don't forget to breath," Drikall whispered in her ear.

Jesmin jerked away from the window so fast she nearly knocked her head against one of his horns.

"I was breathing," she insisted. "I'm totally breathing. I'm fine."

Drikall and Sharr were giving her knowing grins, and there was a tinkle in Huhunna's dark eyes. She looked at the seat behind her and saw Scut, still staring out his own porthole, not paying attention to them at all.

As the vectored toward the only settlement Jesmin had seen so far, she dared reach out with the Force a little. She could normally use it to get a vague sense of the moods of the people around her. Despite the strange and legendary nature of the world they were about to step foot on, Sharr, Huhunna, and Drikall all seemed to be calm, professional, focused on the tasks ahead of them.

She couldn't read Scut at all; not his face, and not in the Force, where he was as blank as ever.

Once the shuttle set down on the flat grassy landing field

outside the town, the landing ramp swung down. The shuttle's passenger cabin was suddenly full of wind and natural light. As she unhooked her crash webbing, Jesmin took a deep breath of the cool fresh air, the kind she hadn't breathed in what seemed like months.

Then she followed Sharr, Huhunna, and Drikall down the ramp and onto Zonama Sekot's surface.

She didn't open herself to the Force, not right away. She took in the broad field, dotted with living Sekotan airships and shuttles from the fleet in orbit. She tilted her head back and watched the blue cloud-streaked dome of the sky as wind blew loose strands of dirty-blond hair in her face.

Her mother had said that being on this planet, touching the Force here, had been a beautiful experience, like she was surrendering herself to being one part of a graceful and beautiful whole, and trusting that whole and all of its pieces. Her brother had said that he'd actually felt his Force powers amplify; that he'd been able to sense others more clearly.

Jesmin closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened herself to the Force.

She could feel Sharr and Huhunna, Drikall and the shuttle's crew, the local Ferroan techs, all moving around with methodical precision as they went about their business. She felt, too, stirrings of life in the forests beyond, but they felt very vague, very distant.

Without opening her eyes, she placed a hand on her lightsaber hilt, as though that might somehow bring her a closer connection to the world around her. Nothing changed.

She opened her eyes and looked around. Huhunna was grunting at a scared-looking Ferroan tech while Sharr interpreted. Drikall had shifted a big heavy bag of medical supplies onto his back.

She looked behind her to see Scut, still standing tentatively on the edge of the landing ramp, both feet still firmly on metal. Their eyes met. He looked almost afraid.

"Come on," she said, "It won't bite."

Scut put one foot on the grass, two. He walked until he was right next to Jesmin. He looked up at the clear sky and took a deep breath. The edges of his lipless Yuuzhan Vong mouth

bent, like a human smile.

"I should have come here a long time ago," he said.

Jesmin looked around. There weren't any other Yuuzhan Vong on the landing pad that she could see. She asked, "Do you... feel something here?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Scut's voice was airy, distant. "Maybe it's all in my head. But I've *wanted* to come here for so long... I've been afraid of it too, but deep down... I think I knew this had to happen eventually."

Drikall was throwing his cargo onto the back of a cart hooked onto some bipedal, vaguely reptilian beast of burden- Yuuzhan Vog biotech or just native wildlife, she had no idea. The Ferroan tech, finally getting Huhunna's point, slunk off to do whatever she'd requested of him.

"What do you feel?" Scut asked her.

She blinked, tried to hold up a frown. "I'm not sure. I need to... spend more time here, I think."

"But your Force," Scut said, "Is it talking to you?"

"I don't know. I think... it's talking."

Talking to someone, but not her. Yes, that was how it felt, like all the life in the far-off forests were all tangled together into some elaborate network of harmonious Force-bound communication, but she could only pick up tiny, far off hints of it.

In that sense, the Force was like it had always been. It was out there, she knew, but she couldn't grasp hold of it. She *knew* what it felt like to really touch the Force; she'd felt it during the fight in the nebula, when the whole universe had seemed to speak to her and direct her two critical torpedoes that broke Myri Antilles' escape pod free of its tractor beam and delivered her to freedom. She'd been hoping to feel that sense of communion again here on Zonama Sekot, but so far it felt shockingly normal.

Scut, though mistook her entirely. He said, "It's almost like I can hear some too... It's probably all in my head. I need to find the other Yuuzhan Vong."

A cool breeze cut over the clearing; Jesmin shivered. "I'm sure we can find you some."

"Hey!" Sharr waved from over by the laden-down cart. "Stop communing with the cosmos! We've got work to do!"

Jesmin felt relieved for the escape. She smiled and said, "Right away, boss."

She started toward the rest of her team. After a moment's hesitation, Scut followed behind her.

Chapter 4

The fleet hung in space above the disc of ice and meteor particles, so close that to cursory scans and the naked eye their ships were just stray chunks of space material orbiting the silver-and-white gas giant known to their charts simply as VB-196a. From the viewport on bridge of the star destroyer *Phoenix*, it felt like you were standing in the middle of a broad plane of ice that curved gently into the distance, while the planet's equally cold glow emanated from the left side.

To Miranda Fardreamer, the scene seemed colder and more lonely than a blank field of stars. She wished they'd move, but of course, nobody cared what she thought.

She was currently assigned a Brevet Ensign rank in the tactical division, a replacement for an officer killed during the recent three-way brawl in the red nebula. Miranda was barely nineteen and most of the officers on the bridge were older than her. Her unit commander was a wrinkled, gray-faced little Bimm who, she gathered, had lost his family during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion of his homeworld and had joined Bren Aref'ja's True Victory fleet because he had nothing else to work toward save revenge. He looked more tired than driven, though. Everybody did nowadays.

Miranda understood perfectly. In the beginning, she'd been contacted by a black-furred Bothan as she worked tables at a casino on Fondor and ran courier for black-market goods on the side. The black-furred Bothan had wanted information on decommissioned ships, and since he paid well, she obliged without thought. That Bothan had passed her on to another one

for a job, this one with grizzly brown fur, who'd taken her from Fondor to Gyndine, then to Kothlis, and finally to an uninhabited system in Bothan Space where Bren Aref'ja had assembled a fleet of renegade ships and crew with the intent on exterminating the Yuuzhan Vong in their hiding space in the Unknown Regions.

For Miranda, who'd lost one parent to the Yuuzhan Vong and another to the infamous mad Jedi Jacen Solo, revenge sounded like a pretty good idea. Revenge on the Vong, revenge on the Jedi, revenge on the whole wretched system of a galaxy that had turned her life progressively to *poodoo* since just after she was born. Plus, it beat waiting tables and dealing with lecherous low-lives on Fondor.

When she started running missions for True Victory, as Aref'ja called it, she'd known she was indulging unhealthy anger, and that it might get her hurt or killed. To her own mild surprise, she hadn't cared. Being orphaned, having to survive by herself in the underbelly of a great manufacturing world, she'd learned pragmatism. She's learned ruthlessness. She'd learned how to stifle her anger at the universe so she could get on with her day.

But, it seemed, she hadn't learned how to get rid of it.

So she'd done missions for True Victory. She'd even killed a man for it. She'd fought Jedi, scrambled across the sun-scorched wastes of her dead father's homeworld, and journeyed out into the unknown depths of space and done battle with upright Alliance forces, riotous Mandalorians, and devilish Yuuzhan Vong. Stolen a lightsaber too, which she was a little proud of, even though all she did was keep it in a drawer in her quarters.

She tried to think of that lightsaber now, as she stood in front of Bren Aref'ja in the admiral's personal salon just aft of the bridge. She tried to draw some confidence from it.

Aref'ja sat back in his chair, looking up at the teenage human standing straight before him. He looked distracted, even as he listened to her give her report from the time she'd spent as his envoy and agent aboard Daala's star destroyer.

"Now that the Mandalorians are gone," she said, "It leaves a big hole in Daala's capabilities. She still has some Imperial

commando teams, but if she plans on an infantry or special op, she's lost her best people."

"What kind of damage did the Mandos do to *Chimaera* on the way out?" Aref'ja asked. He sounded very tired.

"I'm not exactly sure," Miranda admitted. "She tried to keep me from seeing the details, but she lost her captain."

"And replaced him with a defector from Jagged Fel's task force. I'm aware of that. What else?"

"From what I would guess, sir, I'd say she's down at least one squadron of TIEs, an assault shuttle, and at least a dozen of her own commandos."

"Those Mandalorians are tough beings."

"And now they're our enemy," Miranda said under her breath. She didn't relish the thought of facing Fett's people again in battle.

Aref'ja, though, picked up his head and looked at her with narrowed eyes. Afraid she'd misspoke, but unsure how, Miranda opened her mouth to apologize, but Aref'ja cut her off with the wave of a paw.

"It's very likely," he said, "That Fel convinced Boba Fett that his Chiss allies could cook up a cure for Lecersen's nanovirus."

"I see, sir." It explained Fett's sudden baffling switch in loyalties.

Aref'ja sighed. "Fett is not the type to stick around on good faith. I imagine he's taken his people to Chiss space. That eliminates two potential problems.

"Two, sir?"

"Between losing the Mandalorians and losing *Valor*, she's lost her upper hand in this... partnership." Aref'ja bore his fangs in a predatory Bothan smile, but somehow it seemed forced and tired. "It's why you're back here after all."

Miranda just nodded.

Aref'ja leaned forward. "Let me ask you one more thing, Ensign. What did you make of Daala's crew, their loyalties? Are they driven by personal fealty to Daala? Some Imperial ideal? Or do they just want revenge on the Vong?"

Miranda had to think about that. *Chimaera*'s crew hadn't been especially willing to make small talk with Aref'ja's spies, but Miranda had been able to wrestle conversations from a few

of them, mostly young males.

"I think it's a mix, sir. They all hate the Vong, of course. The older ones are more loyal to the old Empire. The younger ones just want payback."

"And how many of the crew are, as you say, younger? How many older?"

Those were loose terms; on *Phoenix* itself, maybe sixty percent had fought the Yuuzhan Vong themselves; the other forty included those like Miranda, who'd lost others through them. Even among those who had, ages ranged widely; Captains Vatrim and Auburn were old warhorses who'd battled the Empire, while *Phoenix's* new Captain Welby was a full generation younger.

"Do you mean how many fought the Vong themselves, sir? "At least on *Chimaera*, I'd say maybe seventy percent looked old enough to fight the Vong. I can't speak to the other ships."

"I understand *Chimaera's* new captain is a non-human female. How does Daala's crew feel about that?"

"I think a lot of them are... surprised. But I don't think anyone's going to mutiny, if that's what you're asking."

"Well, it does no harm to hope." He said without humor. "All right, Ensign. That is all for now. You may report back to Captain Welby."

Just hearing the name of *Phoenix's* new commanding officer made Miranda's breath catch, because just the thought of the new captain made her think of the old captain, Elscor Loro, crumpling in front of a firing squad.

Captain Loro had been a hard woman, made bitter and angry by a lifetime of loss. Miranda had fought a lot in common with the old crone. Both placed the weight of their suffering on the shoulders of the Yuuzhan Vong, and fought against them because they had nothing better to do. Miranda had thought that Loro understood that similarity. Yet in the end Loro had helped *Phoenix's* prize prisoners escape, and fatally damaged one of their own ships in the process.

She'd gone out with a smile.

Miranda didn't blame Aref'ja for it. At least, not logically. Loro had killed her own allies and let a crucial asset escape. For that, the only real punishment was death. So she didn't

blame Aref'ja; she wondered if he did.

She tried to keep the tremor out of her voice as she said, "Sir, if you need me for anything else, any other duty, I'm eager to help."

She tried not to feel foolish as the Bothan looked her over. She'd joined this fleet because she wanted to *do* something, to be worth something; even though she'd hated going over to *Chimaera*, she'd consoled herself with the thought that this might win her some redemption in Aref'ja's eyes after her failure on Tatooine.

But she wasn't getting forgiveness today. The admiral simply nodded and said, "Dismissed, Ensign."

Miranda turned and marched out the command salon. She checked in with Floran Welby, a pale-haired woman barely into middle age, then went down into the crew pit and tried to busy herself with work.

It didn't work, and when Aref'ja walked out onto the bridge she couldn't help but watch him out of the corner of her eye. As he talked quietly with Welby, his shoulders were hunched and he avoided the gaze of his crew, as if he was ashamed of everything that had happened the day before: botched battle, escape, execution, all of it.

Before the escape, Miranda had spent a lot of time talking with one of the prisoners. She hadn't been too much older than Miranda, but she'd seemed younger. Softer, at least. Her parents weren't only alive, they were heroes. Myri Antilles had possessed friends, a job, a purpose. Miranda hated her for her softness and she envied her for it too.

She was starting to envy Antilles and Loro both for escaping while they could. Miranda had the feeling things were going to get a lot worse pretty soon.

As if to confirm the feeling in her gut, the communications lieutenant raised her voice to tell Aref'ja, "Admiral, we've got a communication from *Chimera*. Admiral Daala requests that you report to your ready room to receive a private encrypted transmission."

"She does, does she?" Aref'ja stopped pacing. One ear twitched. "Very well. Put the line through."

"Yes, sir."

Head still low, shoulders still hunched, Aref'ja walked down the aisle and off the bridge. Every crewman watched him, and they all tried to pretend they didn't.

Miranda heard the crewman next to her, a leather-faced Ishi Tib, mutter, "Gotta run when the master calls."

"Do you have something important to say, ensign?" their lieutenant said. The old Bimm was tiny but could sound imperious when she wanted.

"No, ma'am," the Ishi Tib shook his head.

"I didn't think so," the lieutenant sniffed. "Back to work."

"Yes ma'am."

The Bimm turned back to her console. Miranda glanced up to see Captain Welby staring down at them, lips tight and forehead wrinkled in a frow. Miranda felt scolded, even though she hadn't done anything wrong, and went back to monitoring her station.

Her scanners showed the entire fleet laid out like a trail of bread-crumbs, orbiting above the planet's icy disc. Their Imperial allies were outnumbered and outgunned by at least two-to-one, but despite Aref'ja's recent words, it looked like Daala was still calling the shots. Maybe Aref'ja was afraid of offending her and losing the alliance, but right now Miranda thought it made him look weak, and she clearly wasn't alone.

But of course, what did it matter what Miranda Fardeamer thought? It hadn't mattered to anyone in the universe before, and it wouldn't matter to anyone again.

Anyone except, maybe, Myri Antilles and Elscor Loro, but Miranda didn't expect to see either of them again.

Not before she was dead, anyway.

The way things were going, she might not have long to wait.

Fy'lyor now stood on the bridge of legendary *Chimaera* as her captain. Growing up as a non-human in the Empire, driven to succeed in its navy against all prejudices, commanding the great Thrawn's flagship was something she'd fantasized about, yearned for, but never believed could happen. Now it *had* happened, and she had no idea what to think. The situation was beyond surreal.

Equally unbelievable was the woman she now followed off the bridge and in to the private command salon. Admiral Daala had been almost as legendary as Thrawn when she'd been growing up. For a long time most people assumed she was dead. In many ways she was completely unlike the Chiss Grand Admiral. Whereas Thrawn was careful and plotting, Daala fought like a cornered nexu. Her unpredictability led to widely varied battle results, but she could always be counted on for the dramatic strike, the unexpected counter. One legendary admiral was an alien, the other was a woman, but since Fy'lyor was both, Thrawn and Daala alike had been idols of her childhood.

For the same reasons Fy'lyor had admired the admiral, so Daala had clearly taken a liking to her, going so far as to capture her from her ship with the Trinity Fleet and convince her to join the renegades. Unlike Daala or the True Victory people, Fy'lyor had no burning desire to fight the Yuuzhan Vong. What she did want, however, was a stronger galaxy with a stronger Empire, and right now Vitor Reige and Jagged Fel seemed intent on imitating all the worst mistakes of anarchy that called itself a Galactic Alliance.

Daala's methods as chief-of-state of the Alliance had proven ineffective against the scheming of the Jedi and her own Imperial 'allies.' Her cornered-nexu approach had a much better chance of working with the Empire, and Fy'lyor had suddenly found herself at Daala's right hand, poised to remake the Empire and the entire galaxy. All they had to do first was perform a little genocide.

No, surreal didn't begin to cover it.

Daala led her into the tactical salon and keyed her encryption code into the holographic transmitter. Before turning it on she gestured for Fy'lyor to stand at her side. The Twi'lek woman straightened her uniform and stepped beside the tall, gray-haired admiral.

A blue holographic image appeared before them. Fy'lyor was not an expert at reading Bothan facial expressions, but it appeared that Admiral Bren Aref'ja was stressed. His fur looked more bristly than normal and his lips were curled back to reveal white canines. He might have been trying to imitate a

humanoid smile, or he might have been trying to look aggressive. Either way, it was disconcerting.

"Thank you for replying, Admiral," Daala said. "What is the status of your ships?"

"We've patched up the hull breaches on *Phoenix*," the Bothan explained. He sounded irritated, like he had someplace else to be. "*Dey'rylan* and *Fey'lya* report complete repairs as well."

"What about the crew from *Melan*?" Daala asked, naming the Bothan cruiser that had been destroyed in a slug-fest with the Trinity flagship during the nebula battle.

"Very few escaped before she was destroyed," Aref'ja said. "However, her fighter complement has been reapportioned to *Dey'rylan* and *Fey'lya*, to make up for the ones they lost."

"Very good," Daala nodded. "Captain Fy'lyor, would you please report on the status of *Valor's* remains?"

Valor had been destroyed when Aref'ja's own captain had fired upon it. The Bothan bristled at the mention of the name, but being a gentleman he did not mention the damage Daala's own Mandalorians had done to the fleet.

Fy'lyor cleared her throat. "We managed to salvage everything we can from the ship. Supplies, fuel, important metals. We've distributed them evenly among our ships. I can send you a list of the salvage, in case one of your ships desperately needs something."

"I appreciate that. Please do." Aref'ja shifted his tired eyes to Daala. "Admiral, may I ask what you plan to do now? We can't hide and lick our wounds forever."

"Of course," Daala nodded. "I apologize for not telling you this before, Admiral, but *Valor* accomplished one important feat before her... death."

"And what is that?"

"*Valor*, as well as *Chimaera* and *Resolve*, carried onboard a certain missile designed to burrow into yorik coral. This missile is designed *not* to explode on impact."

"You *harpooned* the Yuuzhan Vong ship?" Aref'ja's fur rippled in incredulity or confusion.

"This missile contained a tracking device," Daala said simply. Fy'lyor tried to hide her surprise, and wondered what other secrets Daala had close to the chest.

"I was... unaware of such technology," Aref'ja was clearly annoyed.

"It was devised by my late ally," Daala said, referring to Moff Drikl Lecersen, who had been gunned down by the Mandalorians during the escape. While useful, Lecersen was also as slippery as a greased Hutt, and Fy'lyor was glad to see him gone.

"And this tracking device, do you have a read on it?"

"Indeed I do," Daala nodded, and Fy'lyor could only wonder *where*? Where was Daala keeping all her secret tools and tricks so that even the captain of her flagship couldn't find them?

Of course, this was an old ship with plenty of hidden rooms and passages, and Fy'lyor had only been captain for less than twenty-four standard hours. Still, she felt a little humiliated.

"Well?" Aref'ja fur bristled again. "What do you intend to *do* about this?"

"It's simple," Daala said. "We launch a stealth recon flight and shadow the fleet. We make measure of its capabilities and decide whether or not to attack."

"I see." Aref'ja was clearly unhappy with being kept in the dark, and Fy'lyor didn't blame him.

"However," Daala said, "I would be reluctant to attack at this time. I believe we could gain much by shadowing the fleet and learning its movement. More importantly, this fleet is not our main priority and should not be confused as such."

"What do you mean?" Aref'ja ears flattened. "What *is* our enemy, *Admiral*?"

Daala ignored his insouciance. "My dear Admiral, you know what our true enemy is. We cannot be rid of the Vong until we rid ourselves of Zonama Sekot."

Fy'lyor had heard many things, mostly contradictory, about the so-called living world. Many of them said it was very capable of defending itself. If Daala had a secret plan to defeat it, Fy'lyor couldn't guess it.

"You expect them to lead us to their homeworld?" Aref'ja asked.

"It is possible," Daala said simply. "We must watch and observe. Tell me, Admiral, does your fleet have any of those reconnaissance-model X-wings fighters?"

"We have several," Aref'ja allowed.

"Then I'll give you the coordinates," Daala smiled tightly. "Please investigate and report back within five hours."

Aref'ja nodded. "Very well. Thank you, Admiral."

"Thank *you*," Daala said, and killed the transmission. She blew out a breath, looked at Fy'lyor, and smiled. "Well, that went well, didn't it?"

"We have reconnaissance ships here," Fy'lyor said. "But you wanted to involve him in process. Make him feel like a trusted part of this mission."

"Very good," Daala nodded. "We must keep our allies happy, after all."

"And informed?" Fy'lyor tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Daala chuckled. "Don't be offended, Captain. I have many resources and security is clearly an important issue right now."

So she wasn't going to share her sources. Fy'lyor tried not to be disappointed; it was the Admiral's prerogative, and she was certainly not obliged to share every bit of intelligence with her subordinates. It did, however, make her feel less enthusiastic about her new posting.

As if for solace, Daala placed a hand on Fy'lyor's shoulder. "Don't look so glum, captain. There is still a great deal of work to be done. Certainly, there is plenty to keep you busy."

"Such as?"

Daala took a small datachip out of her pocket. "First, transmit these coordinates to *Phoenix*, along with the list of salvage from *Valor*."

Fy'lyor took the datachip in her red palm. Daala took out a second and said, "This contains all the information we've gathered about Zonama Sekot. Much is heresy, but it also contains information from Alliance intelligence and eyewitness accounts from the recapture of Coruscant."

Fy'lyor pocketed the first datachip and took the second. It was physically identical but felt so much heavier. She asked, "What should I do with this information, Admiral?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Daala grinned. "I want you to come up with a battle plan. I want it ready for review in fifteen hours. Can it be done?"

“Yes, sir!” Fy'lyor snapped a salute.

Daala still held the datachip in her hand. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, Captain, but first things first. Give Arefja what he needs.”

“Yes, sir,” Fy'lyor repeated. She lowered her hand and picked up the datachip on the way. “I won't let you down, Admiral.”

The old woman nodded approvingly, as though she really believed Fy'lyor's words. It was enough to make Fy'lyor believe them too.

Chapter 5

It was a strange thing to find yourself seeking shelter in the home of your enemies, but Gotab had done it before.

That had been the better part of a century ago and he hadn't been Gotab then. He'd been Bardan Jusik, a Jedi, and even before he'd swapped the brown robes for a full suit of *beskar*, he hadn't considered Mandalorians the enemy, not really, despite the longstanding animosity between the two groups, or the fact that one of his very first combat missions in the Clone Wars had been against *Mando* mercenary Ghez Hokan and his Separatist bosses.

The Yuuzhan Vong, though, had *definitely* been then enemy. They'd fallen on Mandalore with the same awful rapaciousness that they'd fallen on everywhere else. Gotab had lost a lot of people he'd cared about to the *vongese*, including beings he'd called sons.

It was almost surreal to be on this living planet, this world that sang with a harmonious Force-melody he couldn't stop hearing despite having largely walked away from the Force sixty years ago. It was utterly mind-bending to walk down the narrow lanes of this village and see so many Yuuzhan Vong faces (some scarred, some tattooed, some smooth and clear) and see no malice in them.

It unsettled him too much. He didn't know what to make of it. So in the end, he did his best to hole up in the daumutek at the village edge the Mandalorians had been given and not interact with any of the locals. The others did too. There was,

admittedly, something *Mando-ish* about living in a squat, fairly primitive hut on the edge of the forest. The broad domed structure, its shape and basic size, brought back surprising memories of the Kyrimorut *karyai* the Skirata clan had taken refuge in at the end of the Clone Wars.

It was such a strange comparison- *Kal'buir's* humble hut and this organic *vongese* growth- that he was surprised it occurred to him. He was even more surprised when Mereel sidled up next to him and said, "Feels like we went full *shabla* circle a little, don't it?"

Gotab's brow wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

The two old men sat on a bench on the rim of the daumutek. In the middle of the broad round space was Venku, dressed in the thin white clothes he'd been shipped down from *Celestial* in, was doing stretches. Ordo's grandkids, in simple black jumpsuits, were doing simple push-ups. Gotab and Mereel were the only ones wearing armor, and even they'd left their helmets in the shuttle that had taken them down to the planet, along with the handful of small arms that Jaina Solo had told them they'd be allowed to take. Said shuttle and equipment were now being carefully guarded by some Ferroan locals who very very determined that no one use them unless there was a real emergency.

"Kyrimorut's a long time gone," Gotab told the shaggy old clone.

"All of us watching out for *Kad'ika*, though," Mereel grunted. "Feels familiar."

He supposed it did. Aside from Jaing, who'd gone off to Csilla to make sure the Chiss and Boba Fett both kept their promise to develop a counteragent to Lecersen's nanovirus, the only ones left alive who'd joined Skirata's refuge were in this humble hut.

After Venku had sufficiently limbered up, Bess and Jendri started helping him with exercises. They hadn't been able to scrounge up much, but Jendri had found a couple chair-arm cushions in the back of one of the shuttles, and right now he was holding them up, one flat against either forearm for Venku to practice punching. Bess stood back and quietly critiqued her

uncle stance, telling him to pick up his heel more and keep his shoulders square, like the eighty-year-old man learning how to throw jabs for the first time.

Mereel was right. After all this time, all of them were quietly focused on *Kad'ika*, protecting him from hurt, trying to raise him up to be the proper *Mando* warrior everyone knew he could be.

Of course, that was what Gotab had been doing almost all his life.

Venku didn't seem embarrassed at being babied. He knew better than any of them what a miracle it was that he was alive and standing at all. The fact his broken, messed-up body was coordinated enough to land a few right jabs was astounding, even to Gotab, and greater evidence than any that this planet really was special.

They'd moved on to hooks when Jaina Solo showed up. The woman announced herself silent with the Force, turning Gotab's attention away from the sparring to woman's shape half-filling the daumutek's entry portal.

It seemed like she wanted a talk. He had half a mind to tell her to come over and sit down and watch the match, but thought better of it. He picked his heavy old body off the bench and shuffled over to portal.

"What can I help you with, *ad'ika*?" he asked quietly as Venku, Bess, and Jendri stayed focused on their sparring.

Instead of answering his question, Jaina tilted her chin toward Venku. "How's he doing?"

"How does it look?"

"He need to keep his right heel up."

Gotab snorted. "He already knows. But it's damned impressive. I'll admit that."

"You're welcome." Jaina smiled a little.

"So, *ad'ika*, why are you here?"

"I wanted to check on Venku, see how he was recovering."

"And the rest of us too? *Mer'ika*'s not going to start any brawls with *vongese*, don't worry. I can keep him in line." He wasn't joking; the old brave actually might try it.

"Your people are free to move around the village. You don't have to stay in the daumutek."

"It's better this way. I'm not a Jedi any more. I don't have your... skill for forgiveness."

"Fair enough," she said softly. "I was wondered if you wanted something *else* to do, though."

Gotab looked back at the sparring ring. "That depends on *Kad'ika*."

"I know. But I thought I'd tell you first."

"Tell me what?"

"I'm taking some Alliance and Imperial techs and flying out to the planet's hyperdrive core. We're going to look at the engines and see if we can't get them working again."

"Sounds like a good plan. You want *us* to come along?"

"I would, yes."

He raised a white eyebrow. "Want to keep an eye on us, do you?"

"Your people have useful skills," she said, avoiding the question. He assumed that meant *yes*.

"I don't know about that. Venku's still all wobbly, body *and* mind. Bess, she's a brawler, not a tech. Jendri and *Mer'ika*, well..."

"Your name means 'engineer,'" she reminded him. "I assume you know your way around a hyperdrive core."

"Never seen one big enough to move a planet."

"Don't you want to, though?"

He looked at her, saw honest curiosity in her dark eyes. He had to admit he did. Everything about this damned planet was mystifying and strange and threatened to wake an old boyish sense of wonder he'd put behind him decades ago. It was taking conscious effort to force his attention where it belonged: on the family he'd chosen instead of the nebulous Force mysticism he'd been born and raised in.

"I'm a little old for adventures," he reminded her.

She shrugged. "But here you are."

She had him there. His comfortable retirement had ended the moment the Imperials dropped that nanovirus into Mandalore's atmosphere with the intent of killing all his family.

In the end, it was his family's choice, so he blew a sharp whistle and drew everyone's attention. Venku, pale and slick with sweat, looked glad for the reprieve, and he joined Bess

and Jendri as they walked toward the new arrival. As for Mereel, he stayed perched on his bench like a shaggy gray gargoyle, watching intently.

"We've just got an offer here from Master Solo," Gotab told them. His eyes passed over them all before settling on Venku's. "She wants us to come and help fix the planet's hyperdrive cores."

Bess' face stayed stiff, but Jendri's softened with curiosity. He asked Jaina, "Are they really big enough to move a planet?"

She smiled tightly. "So I've been told. We can see for ourselves soon."

"Hold up," Mereel called from the bench. "This isn't your call, *Jen'ika*."

"I know." The young man looked at Venku. Everyone else did too.

The man didn't shirk from their attention. He wiped a little sweat off his forehead and asked Jaina, "What do you think we can do there?"

"Help us run tests, diagnostics. Maybe climb a little into the bowels of the engine cores."

"Anyone can do that," Gotab reminded him.

"It's also some fresh air." Jaina looked at the daumutek's low domed ceiling. "A change of scenery. A way to give your body *and* mind a little more exercise." She paused, then added, "It's a way to learn more about this planet, too."

Everyone watched Venku, waiting for his reply. Gotab knew *Kad'ika* was surprised and awed by this place that had saved him, even more so than Gotab because, unlike the old ex-Jedi, he'd only been trained to use the Force in simple, straightforward, practical ways that would help his *vode* in combat situations. All this mystical communion with the cosmos stuff was something Gotab, quite deliberately, had never tried to pass on to Darman and Etain's son.

For the first time, Gotab was starting to doubt that decision. So, too, was Venku. He hid it from his face, but Gotab could feel it in the Force. Hiding emotions was something else Gotab had never taught him.

"All right, we'll go," Venku said, then added, "We owe you that much."

Bess' and Jendri's eyes went wide at that simply phrase. They'd spent their whole lives knowing *Kad'ika* as the man who said *Mandos* should watch out for *Mandos*, and nothing else. They didn't fight other peoples' wars and they certainly didn't owe them anything either. Protect the *Mando'ade* and nothing else; it had been Venku's rallying cry since Gotab had told a ten-year-old boy the story of his parents' lives and deaths.

But Gotab wasn't surprised. He knew, already, that this planet was changing his *Kad'ika*. What it would change him into, he had no idea; at sixty years old, Venku Skirata was too old to pull the about-face a teenage Bardan Jusik had.

In the end, though, it didn't matter. Gotab would watch over him, protect him, no matter the cost.

He owed Darman and Etain that much, even after all this time.

No matter how much he tried, Ben couldn't get used to being around Yuuzhan Vong. He spent a good two hours with Harrar and his two acolytes, explaining their mission so far, and it never stopped being unsettling. This whole world was rich with the Force; even the buildings were alive. Yet Harrar was a void to him. It felt as though he and Tahiri were sitting in a room by themselves, talking to empty air.

The total *lack* of the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force was disturbing on an instinctual level. More than that, it reminded him of Jacen, who more and more often would shroud himself so that others couldn't feel him in the Force. It was a skill he'd picked up in Yuuzhan Vong captivity, adding yet another level of association between these strange, frightening beings and the equally strange and frightening *thing* his cousin had become.

At the same time, it was intellectually confusing too. He'd heard the explanation that the Yuuzhan Vong had been stripped of the Force, or forcibly removed to plane different from the rest of the universe, so that their savagery could no longer pollute things with the Dark Side. Yet the Zonama Sekot was a seed of the Yuuzhan Vong homeworld, an image of it before it had become horribly corrupted. The Yuuzhan Vong were absent

from the Force, and Zonama Sekot was rich with it, and that meant they should have been incompatible, but from everything Ben could see, they were coexisting peacefully.

After two hours of talking with Harrar, Ben excused himself. He wandered through the streets of the town, drawing stares from every Ferroan and Yuuzhan Vong he passed. It made him self-conscious about being human, and about being a Jedi, and the latter especially was something he'd tried very hard to escape all his life.

The town was not large, and he was able to slip off the main street, wind past a few more domelike buildings, and work his way into the surrounding forest.

Ben hadn't grown up in a natural setting like Jaina, Tahiri, or Jacen, but he didn't feel out of place here. Maybe that was Sekot touching him through the Force, he didn't know. He wandered around the trunks of massive bora trees, bent low to examine leaves decaying to mulch on the forest floor, and had a minute-long stare-off with some big-eyed furry mammal hanging off a branch over his head.

It was a good way to take his mind off things.

He wandered for a while, until he came to a pond surrounded by tall trees. He bent low, found a smooth rock, and tried to skip it across the water. Not being a nature boy, he failed miserably, but he picked up another one and tried again. This one dashed across the surface of the water once before plunking down into the depths, and he felt mildly accomplished.

"Hey!" said a voice. Ben turned around to see a child peeking out from behind a treetrunk. He was a human with blond hair, and was dressed in a sand-color tunic.

"Hey mister," the kid said, "You're not very good."

Ben stared. Aside from Danni Quee and assorted new arrivals, he hadn't seen any humans since landing on Zonama Sekot. Now one was harassing him on his stone-skipping skills.

"I've never really tried it before," Ben said lamely. "You think you can do better?"

The boy shook his head. "No. Not yet.."

Ben crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, I guess you're in no place to judge, are you?"

The boy smirked. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

"I just wanted to take a walk. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I like taking walks too."

Ben frowned. "Hey, do you have parents with you?"

"You think I'm too young?"

"No offense, but yeah, you're a little young to be wandering around in the woods by yourself."

A mischievous grin appeared on the boy's face. "I could say the same thing about you."

"Kid, I think I'm a little older than you."

"No," the boy said firmly, "You're not."

Then he turned and ran.

Ben stared for a second, stunned, confused, wondering if he really wanted to charge through the forest after some bratty little kid. He didn't want the kid to get hurt, though, so with a sigh he set off in pursuit.

Whoever he was, he moved fast. Ben caught only occasional flashes of gold hair and dappled sunlight as he plunged deeper into the forest. Brush was growing thicker, rising higher out of the mulch, scraping at his ankles and calves. He lowered his head to dodge a low-hanging branch and lost sight of the boy for a moment. He tried to skid to a halt but found himself on a downward slope, into some valley where the vegetation grew even more dense. He lost balance, tipped forward, and nearly plunged head-first into the ravine. Luckily, he was able to grab hold of a tree and keep himself from what could have been a painful, even fatal, fall.

He stood there for a moment, panting and looking in all directions for some sign of the kid. Then it came to him, the simple realization he should have kicked himself for not having sooner.

It must have been Zonama Sekot.

Well, it *could* have been. That would have explained the part about being way older than Ben. He should have thought to reach out with the Force and verify whether or not the kid was there at all.

He felt a surge of frustration, both at himself and at the living world. He should have seen through the trickery, yes, but what as the point? Why would an all-powerful sentient planet

pretend to be a bratty kid and lead him down a wild-mynock-chase through the forest, one that almost got him badly hurt?

"You're brave," a voice said from behind him.

Ben took a deep breath and turned around, slowly. The bright-haired boy was sitting on a fallen log at the top of the slope, looking smugly down at Ben.

"What was the point of that?" Ben asked.

"I wanted to show you something."

"Like *what*?"

The child's face grew serious. "It's down in that ravine. I think you'll be very interested in seeing it."

"That's not very helpful," Ben said.

"It's really better if you see it yourself."

Ben wanted to Sekot a dozen things, most of all why it was playing these games instead of helping to put itself back together. There were thousands of people on its surface who depended on it, but all it wanted to do was have elusive, cryptic encounters with a couple of Jedi.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Ben asked.

The boy blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm glad you're not dressing yourself up as Jacen, or a Yuuzhan Vong. Who are you supposed to be?"

The child's face looked sad, and old beyond its years. "A friend I miss very much. But I've been trying to get in touch with him again."

"Yeah, well, good luck with that." Ben looked back at the ravine. The slope was steep, but if he went slowly, keeping hold of branches and using the Force selectively, it would be no problem.

Still looking at the ravine, he said, "You said I'll know it when I see it, huh?"

"It's someone I *was* able to get in touch with."

Ben thought he heard a smile in the boy's voice, but when he turned to look he saw only an empty log, and the forest spreading beyond.

Ben sighed and began his descent. He went down with the sides of his feet forward, giving him the best traction. He had to grab a branch once or twice to retain his balance, but in the end, he got to the base of the ravine all right.

The bottom was very narrow. A stream trickles down the center and rocks, brush, and trees rose on every side. Ben felt something in the Force, a dim compulsion, and tried to follow the path of stream. He didn't have to go far before before he saw the water wind into the black belly of a cave.

Ben had heard some stories about caves. The one on Dagobah his father had found came to mind. He touched his mother's lightsaber, thought about taking it off his belt and flicking its violet blade on, but then he remembered the rest of his father's story and took his palm away. He went into the cave with empty hands.

He stepped a few meters into the entrance and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. The air smelled of rotting plants, mud, moss and fungi. As his vision cleared he realized that there was, in fact, not much farther he could go. The cave's roof collapsed just a few more meters ahead, and the stream dispersed into a shallow pool that seeped through rocks and trickled deeper into the earth.

If this was what Sekot had wanted him to see, he was a little disappointed. He thought about taking up his mother's lightsaber, maybe hacking up the stone to see if there was anything beyond the end of the cave, but that might also bring a while cliff down on his head. Or summon an evil phantom image of his father or something. Whatever the case, it was nothing Ben wanted.

He was about to turn around when he felt a sudden chill run through his body. He froze, took a deep breath, and placed the palm of his hand just over the lightsaber's hilt. Then he turned around.

His mother was standing in front of him, smiling.

He *knew* it was her, not Sekot, knew it in his gut, even though she looked so much clearer than a Force-ghost, like she was really in the cave bedside him. She didn't look ten years too young, like Jacen had. She looked like he had last seen her, the way she was frozen in mind and memory forever: beautiful but harsh, proud but understanding, ever-determined. And her smile, bittersweet and knowing, was too true to be a simulacrum.

"Goodness," she said, "You keep growing so fast."

His chest felt tight, and his eyes threatened tears. He sniffed them away and took a step closer. "Mom, it's you. How-"

"I don't really know." She shook her head. Long red hair spilled naturally off her shoulders. "But that's not important, is it? The important thing is that you're here."

"Mom, you..." Ben found his throat tighten. He croaked, "I've missed you, Mom."

"I've missed you too," Mara took two steps closer. She looked so *real* to Ben, not like a Force ghost, nor like the projection of her he'd seen in the Lake of Apparitions in the Maw. He reached out to touch her, but when his fingers reached her shoulder they passed through empty air. His hand recoiled instantly.

"It's okay, Ben," she said. "Really. It's all going to be okay."

"I don't know about that." Ben hugged himself. "You know where we are, don't you?"

"It's Zonama Sekot, isn't it?"

Ben nodded. "When you were here before did you..."

"Commune with the dead? No. But I guess Sekot has learned a few tricks since then."

"I hope so," Ben said. He choked again and wiped the tears from his eyes. "It's just good to see you, Mom."

"I'm always watching out for you. You know that right?"

Ben nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"What's wrong, Ben?"

He laughed involuntarily. "I don't know where to start. We're lost in the Unknown Regions, there's some crazy Yuuzhan Vong fleet after us, and some crazy Alliance people who want to kill us too. And there's Admiral Daala, and there's Sith too..."

His mother seemed unphased. "There's always something. But what is it *really*, Ben?"

He swallowed. "Her name's Vestara."

The serenity in his mother's face broke. Now she looked like she was going to cry. "Oh, Ben... *These* are the kind of things I missed..."

"Mom it's not like that." He shook his head. "Vestara's a *Sith*. I thought... I thought I could bring her over to the light, but I was stupid."

"You loved her."

"Yeah," Ben admitted, and wondered how he'd managed to deny it for a long time. "I loved her. And it was a mistake."

"Love isn't a mistake, Ben."

"Tell that to Jacen," he said bitterly.

Mara considered her response for a long time. Finally, she asked, "Do you think you'll have to kill her?"

"I tried to save her once. It didn't work."

"So you think she's irredeemable?"

He didn't know what to say. He'd asked himself that a billion times over, but he knew he was too mixed up inside to say for sure. Love and hate warred and clouded his judgment. He wished he could be rid of emotions, rid of the Force, just a bland automaton who never had to worry about failure and hope and joy and loss. He was sick of them all.

"Ben," his mother said, "When I went after Jacen, I was angry. My love for you made me ready to kill. *Eager* to kill. I went after him with a darkness in my heart."

"He was a Sith Lord," Ben said. "You *had* to do it, just like Jaina had to kill him."

"He wasn't a Sith Lord then," Mara shook her head. "Maybe, if I'd thought things through, I could have saved him. I know I would have done things differently. I probably wouldn't have ended up dead. Maybe Jacen wouldn't have turned into Caedus."

"Oh, Mom, don't--"

She held up a hand. "It's okay, Ben. I'm at peace with what's happened to me, I really am."

"It's not right," he said. "Mom... There's so much I wish I could fix..."

"Me too," she smiled sadly. "But you can't undo the past. You just have to keep walking forward and do your best to make the pain worth it. Don't embrace it like Jacen did. Try to redeem it. Prevent it from happening again. I know it's going to be hard, but nothing worth doing is easy."

"So you're saying... I shouldn't kill Vestara?"

"I'm saying if you do, you'll lose something important in yourself. I don't want you to hurt any more, Ben."

That brought him no clarity. It was what Tahiri had told him too.

"Then... What should I do?"

"Well, your father likes to say that anyone can be redeemed. I don't know if I believe that, but it was always good to have your father telling me that. I always needed his sweetness and light to balance out the dark inside me."

"Dad... hasn't been sweetness and light since you died, Mom. He's gotten... colder. He's still good, still on the light side, but..."

"He's been hurt badly, in ways that can never really heal. But he's strong, Ben, and so are you. I'm so proud of what you've become."

He couldn't keep the tears away this time. "Thanks, Mom. I just... I'm confused. I wish you were here..."

"I *am* here, Ben," she said softly. "I'm with you always."

He tried to wipe the water from his face. "Then... What should I *do*?"

His mother was silent for a long time. When his vision cleared he saw her watching him carefully. Her expression was sad, tender.

"Ben, it took your father to save *me* from the Dark. If anyone can save Vestara, it's you."

"Thanks, Mom." A smile came unbidden. He still had no certainty, no direction, but her confidence meant more than he could say.

"Go with the Force, Ben. I know you'll do the right thing."

His vision blurred again. When he blinked his eyes dry his mother was gone, and he stood alone in a damp, dark cave. The only sound was the tinkle of water beneath his feet and the low whistling of wind against stone. His legs grew weak and he dropped to a crouch, buried his face in his hands, and wept freely.

When his crying was done, when he'd let it all out, Ben walked without hesitation out of the cave.

Chapter 6

Vestara Khai was a Sith. That had been drilled into her since her birth. *Sith* had been her clan, her purpose, her direction, her meaning. *Sith* had been everything. *Sith* was still everything, even though she didn't know what the word meant any more.

The ones she was with now, these One Sith, were unlike anything she'd met before. Certainly they were different from the Lost Tribe she'd grown up with. You could tell it just by looking; all the Darths onboard *Revenge*, their ancient organic Rakatan vessel, resurrected and pulsing with Dark Side energy, all bore tattoos striped in red and black, marking their faces with fearsome elaborate patterns. To one of her Lost Tribe, which prided itself on physical beauty, such markings would have been horrifying.

At least it made them fit in with the Yuuzhan Vong.

Revenge floated in the midst of some two dozen organic cruisers of the renegade Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Apparently, they called themselves True Honor, and had forged a pact with the Sith. With the help of Darth Wyyrlok, Darth Nether, and the other Dark Lords, True Victory had recovered derelict Yuuzhan Vong ships left over from the war. The ships had been reanimated through some fusing of Yuuzhan Vong and Sith biological science, creating vessels even more fearsome than those that had ravaged the galaxy fifteen years ago.

Vestara was not certain of the specifics. All she knew was that this strange alliance went both ways. In exchange for

helping the renegade Yuuzhan Vong build a new fleet with which to terrorize the galaxy, the One Sith were receiving the Yuuzhan Vong's help in healing their mysterious leader, Darth Krayt.

A party of Yuuzhan Vong had just arrived on *Revenge*, and Vestara was part of the honor guard of a dozen Sith warriors who greeted them. Her heritage made her revolt at the sight of the six scarred, tattooed warriors who marched in first. Their armor, rough and spiked, looked like downgraded imitations of whatever Yuuzhan Vong creation had biologically bonded with Darth Krayt, the creation that at once threatened to consume him and also kept him alive after a battle with the Force entity known as Abeloth.

After the warriors came a single member of the shaper caste. He was tall and dark, and his face curiously unmarked by scars, though a few black tattoos ran like tangled vines down his cheeks. On the top of his head he wore the tentacled headdress that marked members of his caste.

Darth Vidious, the Devaronian who stood beside her for the honor guard, was the closest thing she had to a mentor in the One Sith, and he had explained the Yuuzhan Vong caste system to her already. He spoke with approval of the Yuuzhan Vong's strict hierarchical governance. He talked about the harsh punishments they meted out to those who broke with established order, and how it helped them create such an effective war machine. He didn't *say* that he wished they could touch the Force and use the Dark Side, but he didn't have to. Even Vestara, who found the Vong's utter absence in the Force profoundly disturbing, had to admit they made fantastic warriors.

The shaper's party was led to the room where Darth Krayt was being kept. The Dark Lord had emerged from his stasis chamber just days ago, breaking out of his coffin-like resting place like an undead monster out of stories. He'd looked Vestara dead in the eye and demanded her name. She'd felt frightened and humbled by unimaginable Dark Side power.

But while Krayt's power was great, his flesh was weak. The Yuuzhan Vong shaper was led into the chamber by Darth Wyyrlok, Krayt's Chagrian second-in-command, and Dician, a

humanoid female who seemed to serve as Krayt's physician and *Revenge's* chief scientist. While she did not bear the red-and-black markings of an official Sith Lord, she did have patterns of ink writhing across her tanned skin, marking her as a member of One Sith just the same.

With Wyyrlok, Dician, and the shaper inside, that left ten Sith and six Yuuzhan Vong to stand on opposite sides of the anteroom, staring each other down.

Their faces were alien and they were impossible to read through the Force, but Vestara could still get a sense of what was going through the heads of these beings. Their attention kept shifting between the Sith and the unfamiliar room around them. They stood with their snake-like amphistaffs resting stiffly at their sides, a posture temporarily relaxed but ready to spring to motion on short notice. She could tell they would die to defend their commander.

Some things didn't change, whether you were One Sith, Lost Tribe, or Yuuzhan Vong.

After the two sides had stood there for perhaps fifteen minutes, neither side showed outward relaxation, but Vestara could tell that her Sith companions were no longer as tense as they had been. She could feel Darth Vidious' Force presence become strangely calm, like he was settling into some kind of meditation, even though to outward appearance he was still standing alert and fixing his Yuuzhan Vong counterparts with an intimidating glower.

Vestara didn't want to let her mind wander off the Vong. If it did, she knew she wouldn't slip into a peaceful state like Vidious. Her thoughts would be pulled, as if by strong gravitation, to Ben Skywalker.

Earlier, she had stood on the bridge of one of the Yuuzhan Vong frigates and felt Ben on the ship below. As turbolasers and missiles lit up the space between their ships she had reached out with her mind to touch his.

She knew he would be coming, and now he knew she was coming. It seemed an equal trade.

And now, what was to become of them? As she'd stood on the bridge, Vestara had told herself that she was ready to kill Ben. A part of her still loved the Jedi boy, and probably always

would, but the Sith grew stronger through pain. She could never have him, never be with him; their natures as Jedi and Sith was too ingrained in both. Against such an insurmountable fate, hope itself was painful. Hope was a slow, gnawing ache that would distract her until she'd removed it entirely.

The only way to do that was to kill Ben, and while that pain would be horrible in comparison, at least she would end it. Killing Ben would be her necessary passage to a greater level of Dark Side power, the kind Vidious and Krayt had access to.

That was what she told herself during the battle, and that was what she told herself now, though she was getting less and less certain it was true. She tried to hide her doubts from Vidious, from everyone, but she knew when to be honest with herself.

In the end, she knew that the truth would come out only when she and Ben had crossed blades.

After almost an hour of waiting, the door to Krayt's chamber slid open. To Vestara's slight surprise, Krayt himself did not exit. Neither did Dician. Wyyrlok followed the Yuuzhan Vong Shaper, bowing slightly so his horns- one long, the other broken halfway down- didn't catch on the threshold

"Vilath Dal is returning to his ship," Wyyrlok pronounced. "Lord Krayt will remain in his chamber for a time."

As far as declarations went, it was very uninformative. She felt a ripple of annoyance from the Sith Lords, even Vidious.

The tall shaper moved for the exit and his guards fell in after him. The Sith Lords began to follow, but as Vestara moved in Vidious's wake, Darth Wyyrlok called her name.

Her heart almost stopped in her chest. Without breathing, without thinking, she turned and saw the Chagrian towering over her. His hands were clasped in front of him and his eyes burned red-gold with portent.

"What is it, Lord Wyyrlok?" she asked, surprised by how steady her voice was.

"Lord Krayt wishes to see you," he said.

"Me?" Vestara blinked. When Wyyrlok didn't elaborate, she snapped, "Yes, of course. May I go in now?"

Wyyrlok nodded and gestured to the portal. Vestara walked right past him, paused at the entry long enough to take a deep breath, then walked through.

She stepped into the same chamber where Darth Krayt had first awoken. The crystalline lid to his coffin-like sleeping chamber had been removed, and he sat in it now while Dician stood to the side, apparently calibrating some readings from the coffin's control panel.

Darth Krayt's body was encased in some manner of living Yuuzhan Vong armor. Spikes jutted out from his broad shoulders and rough coral-like plates encased his torso, giving him the look of a menacing animal. His head itself was uncovered and bowed, eyes closed in thought or rest. His face was an old man's face, leathery and lined, marked by black tattoos but otherwise normal. It added a strange element of humanity to his otherwise terrifying form.

When Vestara got close enough, he opened his eyes, and any illusion of normality was dispelled. One eye blazed red, the other gleamed icy blue. The pupils were misshaped and it felt to Vestara like she was staring into the eyes of the great Tatooine dragon from which he took his name.

"Leave us, Lady Dician," Krayt said. His voice was low and rasping, not thunderous like Wyyrlok's, but somehow more terrifying for its understatement.

The scientist gave a short nod and quietly stepped out of the room. The portal hissed slightly as it closed, leaving Vestara alone with the dragon.

Before she could say anything, Krayt touched her mind.

For an awful moment she saw a galaxy in flames: Slaughter on Ossus, fire on Coruscant, oceans drifting with corpses. She felt the white agony of Yuuzhan Vong bio-machines tearing into her body, and the searing pain of a lightsaber cleaving off her right hand. She saw explosions blossom over a ringed gas giant, heard a woman's desperate voice crackle over a commlink (she couldn't make out words), felt the hot light of twin suns on her back and the shifting of sand beneath her feet.

For the tiniest fraction of a second, she saw a man in a vacuum suit, floating untethered in space, alone over a bright, burning star.

Then the moment was over and she reeled, gasping, dazed.

She had known powerful Sith Lords from her own tribe, but their power was nothing compared with what this being

radiated. He had been born nearly a century ago, survived wars and horrible calamities, undergone torture and imprisonment by the Yuuzhan Vong, all of which had acted as fire to forge an indomitable will.

She had come to cling to the belief that through pain a Sith grew stronger. Until meeting Krayt she'd fostered the arrogant delusion that, in losing her Tribe and her young love, she knew something about suffering. Now she realized she was just a child after all.

Krayt stared at her wordlessly. She didn't know for how long. She didn't dare move. She felt like an animal frozen before a predator, hoping it would go away.

Finally, Krayt said, "Tell me about Skywalker."

Of course. The time she'd spent in the company of the Jedi Grand Master and his son was probably the only reason Darth Vidious hadn't left her to die on Yavin 4. She didn't feel surprised, or resentful. These One Sith sought to use her just as she sought to use them. Whoever finished with the other first would callously discard them. It was, after all, the Sith way.

"Do not think that is the only reason I called you here," Krayt said, as if he'd read her mind. Maybe he had. "The One Sith are not the Sith of old. I have traveled the galaxy, seeking those with talent and inclination toward the Dark Side of the Force, so that I might add their unique skills toward our collective effort of exterminating the Jedi and bringing order to the galaxy."

"I have inclination," Vestara said. "I have talent too."

"Perhaps," Krayt allowed. "Tell me about Skywalker."

Where to begin? He was old, yet young. Naive, but cunning. He'd lost his foster parents, his wife, both of his nephews, so many students, yet he pressed ever-onward in his quest to make the Jedi order strong. And unlike Vestara's father, his strength and vision did not prevent him from sharing a close bond with his child.

"Until I met you," she said, "I thought he was the most powerful Force user alive."

Both eyes narrowed. "Are you flattering me, Lady Khai, or do you truly believe that I am stronger than he?"

"I don't know, but you seem as strong in the Dark Side as he does in the Light. And that Dark Side *is* stronger, isn't it?" She didn't even know any more. Maybe the Light was better, but the Light had never been within Vestara's reach. She was Sith, had always been Sith, and always would be. Trying to change had only brought her pain.

"My concern is not with Luke Skywalker," Krayt said. "Tell me about his son."

"Ben?" Vestara could not hide her shock. What could Darth Krayt want with *Ben*? Oh, Luke Skywalker's son was powerful, just like his father, but he was young, unpredictable, undisciplined in so many ways.

"He means something to you," Krayt said simply.

"Yes." She couldn't lie, not to those dragon-eyes. "I... I thought I loved him."

"Then you loved him," Krayt said simply. "There is no shame in that. Love is pain and pain makes one stronger."

She could hear knowledge in his voice, deep and personal. She felt though the Force the dim echo of touches, smiles, loss, rage. All she could do was nod.

"A Skywalker stalks my dreams," Krayt said. "Sometimes he is armored in black and kneels before me. Other times we are locked in deadly combat. When I saw first him he was in space above a battle-scarred world, all alone as he drifted through the stars."

Vestara couldn't image Ben Skywalker kneeling before a Sith Lord. Then she remembered that flash of vision, of a man floating not over a scarred planet but a bright star, and wondered what the connection was.

"Are you sure it was Ben?" she asked.

"It was *not*," Krayt said with finality. "This Skywalker was a fully-grown man. I remember a head of messy blonde curls, and a sneering, angry face..."

"That... doesn't sound like Ben."

"Yet it was a Skywalker. I know it. Even if that Skywalker... is yet to be." His eyes had gone distant for a moment, but then they re-focused on her. "Tell me, is Ben the last Skywalker?"

"He's Luke Skywalker's only son, yes. There is... also Jaina, the child of Leia Organa Solo. She is a Skywalker too."

"I do not fear the children of Organa Solo," Krayt said dismissively. "The rabid fumbling of Darth Caedus sowed the seeds of discord we are about to exploit. No, it is the *Skywalkers* who must be dealt with."

"Lord Krayt... Ben Skywalker is *here*. He's part of the Alliance fleet hunting us through the Unknown Regions. Not the renegade fleet, the other one that was sent to bring them down."

"Are you certain of this, Lady Khai?" His gaze blazed gold and blue. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, Lord Krayt. I would never mistake Ben for anyone else."

"Then you must find him, capture him, and bring him to me. Can you do that, Lady Khai?"

She couldn't look away from the dragon's eyes. She didn't know what his intent was- to interrogate Ben, or torture him, or try to turn him to the Dark Side- but she knew Ben would never relent. One way or another, he would be forced past his breaking point by Krayt and die. And Vestara would be undeniably responsible for all his suffering and death.

The agony Vidious had put her through during the battle in the nebula should have cleansed her of all her doubts, but it hadn't. Now, finally, standing in front of Krayt, she found they were all gone. Maybe it was some kind of clever Dark Side trick, but she truly felt a conviction growing inside her.

When she faced Ben Skywalker again it would be painful. To capture him, deliver him to awful death at the hands of Krayt, would be agony. But it was necessary. Pain was the only way to achieve the kind of power needed to remake herself into this new kind of Sith, a Sith on course to remake a galaxy in chaos.

And maybe, when she had turned chaos to order, nothing could ever hurt her again.

"I will do it, My Lord," she said. "You can depend on it."

Krayt nodded in approval, like he saw everything, knew everything inside of her and was pleased.

In the end, Ben Skywalker would be nothing but her sacrifice.

Part II: The Changelings

"You will always be family to us."

Jacen Solo to Tahiri Veila, 29 years ABY

"I understand, Lord Caedus. You're the slime under a Hutt's tail."

Tahiri Veila to Jacen Solo, 41 years ABY

"A sword is a symbol of justice in many cultures. Real justice is blind, and personal feelings don't matter. You sometimes have to kill what you love, end their pain and take it on yourself. Because that's what love is sometimes."

Bardan Jusik to Jaina Solo, 41 years ABY

A LONG TIME AGO...

Jagged Fel guides his clawcraft into the belly of Ralroost with the steady hand of a lifelong pilot. When his craft is fully settled, he shuts down the engines and repulsorslifts, pops the vacuum seal on his cockpit, and eagerly pulls himself out to breathe the cool recycled air of Admiral Kre'fey's flagship.

He spares a few brief words for Shawnkyr and his other Chiss pilots, then makes a beeline across the busy deck. He can see her waiting in the entry to the hallway on the far side, a small woman in a dark green flight suit, brown hair down and framing her face, just the way he likes it.

When he reaches her he doesn't stop. He takes her by the waist with both hands, pushes her into the shadows, and kisses her on the mouth. He's surprised by his own desire. A lifetime among the Chiss has made him an expert at stifling his emotions and focusing on his duty instead of his need. Now, after along and dangerous away mission, he finds that all he needs is Jaina Solo.

When he finally breaks away for oxygen, Jaina pushes him away. For a second he panics that he's gone too far, but then he hears her giggling. It's a silly, girlish laughter, the kind he's not used to hearing from her. When he takes a step back and looks in her brown eyes he sees a new infectious joy.

When he first met Jaina over Ithor, he was surprised how young she seemed. He'd told her she wasn't grim enough. Then she'd lost both her brothers on the same day, and that loss had made her far too grim.

But now here she is, smiling, eyes blazing with happy energy. She takes his hands in hers and says, "Hey, flyboy, have a nice trip?"

"You could say that," Jag allows a smile. Smiling still feels a little strange, like someone is tugging his face in weird directions. "You seem... chipper."

"Of course I'm chipper," Jaina squeezes his hands. "Jacen's back."

Of course, Jag thinks. He knows her brother, captured by the Yuuzhan Vong at Myrkr and left for dead, has in fact returned. He'd been so eager to see Jaina herself that he nearly forgot.

"I heard on HoloNet," Jag says "Congratulations."

"Come on," Jaina tugs him down the hall, still holding both hands. "He's here, on Ralroost."

Well, that explains it.

He works one hand free so she can stop walking backwards, then lets her drag him down the hallway. He's happy for Jaina, happier than he can say, but he feels a spike of sadness inside. When Jaina lost both siblings, a perverse part of him was almost glad, because it gave them something in common. Jagged's brother Davin and his sister Cheriss had both been almost ten years older than him, and they'd both died so long ago he could barely remember them. They'd died as warriors and brought honor to the Fel family name, but they'd lingered through his youth as haunting figures.

He is not the last child of Soontir and Syal Fel. Chak has his own ship in the CEDF, and his younger brother Cem and sister Wyn are both training. Someday they will follow the family tradition and go into the military. He wonders which of the clan will be the next to follow Davin and Cheriss. Sometimes he wonders if it will be him.

But when Jaina pulls him through the door to Ralroost's auxiliary pilot's ready-room, he does his best to push the sadness and foreboding away. You can't be grim all the time. It's probably the best lesson he'd learned from Jaina, one for which he is eternally thankful.

The ready-room is empty except for two people sitting on the sofa in the far corner. Their bodies are angled toward each other, but their postures bespeak caution rather than intimacy.

When Jag and Jaina enter, they both look up, startled out of an apparently personal conversation.

Jag knows Tahiri Veila. The blond girl, small and pretty except for the scars on her forehead, loved Jaina's younger brother Anakin, and has become something of an honorary member of the Solo family since his death. Despite the bond she and Jaina share, Jag has always found Tahiri a little off-putting. Maybe it's because he is uncomfortable with grieving. Maybe it's because those scars, left by Yuuzhan Vong shapers, hint at something more menacing behind her pretty face. Maybe it is because she does not speak plainly, and seems suspicious of everything, including herself.

He has never met the young man with the brown hair and trim beard before, but he can see Jaina in his eyes. Jacen Solo rises to his feet and puts on a smile.

"So," Jacen looks Jag up and down, "I guess you're okay."

"Stop it!" Jaina slaps him on the shoulder, giggling again.

"Jag, meet my brother Jacen. Jacen, meet Jag Fel."

"Nice to meet you," Jag extends a hand. He's never been good at meet-and-greets and stumbles for something to say. "You look good for a dead man."

"Thanks," Jacen chuckles. "You should have seen me a month ago."

Jacen sits back down next to Tahiri and Jaina and Jag plop onto the sofa facing them. Jaina sidles close and loops her arm around Jag's in an open display of affection. He's not used to those, and he tries not to blush.

Jag tries to keep his attention on Jacen. He looks young and old at once, child-like but immensely serious. If Jaina's come to possess a certain grimness, her brother has... perhaps an intensity. When Jacen looks at him, Jag feels like he's being scrutinized somehow.

"So," Jag says, awkwardly keeping his gaze, "I understand you were held captive by the Yuuzhan Vong for almost a year."

"Stang it, Jag!" Jaina shakes her head. "He doesn't want to talk about that."

"I don't mind," Jacen says, and Jag can tell he's not being polite. It's like he actually doesn't mind talking about spending months being tortured by a race of ferocious genocidal aliens.

Jag doesn't know what to make of that either.

"Let's talk about something else," Jaina says. "Jacen, why haven't you gone off to Hapes yet? Tenel Ka would love to see you!"

Now it is Jacen's turn to blush. He seems young and earnest again. "I just haven't got around to it. Sorry. There's so much to do, with the war and all..."

"Well, what about Danni Quee? Jag, you remember her from Borleias, right? Blond, beautiful scientist. Very smart. She's on Mon Cal now, and she and Jacen have been spending a lot of time together. Doing really serious stuff, like sun-bathing in coral reefs, taking long walks along the esplanade at Huereka City..."

"It's not like that," Jacen shakes his head.

"Jacen, I know you can be pretty dense with these things, but trust your twin sister. It is like that."

Tahiri laughs, but there's sadness in her eyes. She says, "It's good to see you two together like this. It's almost like..." Her expression wavers, and her eyes gleam with tears. "I'm sure he'd love to see you now."

An awkward silence falls over the room. Jag tries to think if he's ever had a conversation like this with his surviving siblings, full of teasing and implications. With Wynssa sometimes. She's always been the most rebellious and rambunctious of the Fel children, the one who refuses to be chained down by the strictures of Chiss society. It's something he's always found alternately endearing and annoying about her.

"You're together again," Tahiri says firmly, blinking away her tears. "There's nothing you can't do."

"I'd like to think so," Jacen favors her with a soft smile.

"You're twins. Family," she says. "There's nothing that can break that. Not all the Vong, Sith, or madmen in the galaxy. Nothing."

Chapter 7

“Well, that settles it,” Myri sighed. “We're borked.”

Jagged Fel stood with his hands planted on his hips, scowling at the communications console. The auxiliary command room on *Starless* was a small space, mostly used for emergency overrides and system checks. Now that space was crammed with people. He was on his feet, next to Traest Kre'fey. Myri Antilles and Thaymes Fodrick, the Wraith Squadron communications expert, were crouched around the console from which, in theory, they should be able to start an ultra-encrypted tight-beam communication with Coruscant. Myri's sister, Captain Syal Antilles, stood slightly apart. Her arms were crossed over her chest and a worried frown wrinkled her face.

“I don't understand,” Syal said. “The console seems to be working.”

“It is,” Myri sighed. “We've double- and triple-checked the systems.”

“The signal is beamed via the Esfandia relay to Coruscant, correct?” Kre'fey asked. When Thaymes nodded the Bothan said, “Well, perhaps we're simply sending it to the wrong place.”

“We've double-and triple-checked our position against the star-charts the Chiss have provided us,” Jag said. “The constellations are a perfect match. We know exactly where we are and where we're pointing the transmitter. We're just not getting a response.”

"Could something have happened on Coruscant or Esfandia?" Syal asked gravely.

"Last we heard there was some civil unrest in the capital, but nothing that could have brought down the government," Thaymes shook his head. "And according to Director Loran, the system is rigged with an automated response at both stations. The only way to stop that would be to blow up one of the most secure buildings in the galaxy."

"It could be something simple," Myri offered. "Some gasses or weird interference that's not on our charts. Or it could be something wrong with *Starless* herself. She took some hurt during the fight in the nebula."

"We've been communicating regularly with Jaina on Zonama Sekot," Jagged said, "Not to mention the other ships in the fleet."

"Short-range and long-range transmitters use different systems," Thaymes said. "One could conk out without the other being affected."

"I'll authorize an EV team to check the communications arrays," Syal said.

"Very good," Jag nodded. "In the meantime, I suppose I can contact *Celestial* and see if they have any idea what could be blocking us."

The others nodded but said nothing. Conversations with Wynssa had been tense lately, but he was hoping his sister would be amenable to this simple query.

Thaymes ran a hand through his short hair, then raised it in the air. "Okay, I've got a question. Why not jump out of the system and try a different location?"

Jagged fought a frown. The thought of separating the already-beleaguered Trinity fleet was unappealing from a tactical standpoint. Leaving Jaina behind on the planet was even less so.

"We should double-check the communications arrays first," Syal came to his rescue. "We can make more informed decisions after that."

"Agreed," Kre'fey nodded and looked at Jag. "What is the latest update from the planet?"

"Our techs have just taken a preliminary review of the damaged hyperdrive system. I think Jaina's going to head out there and help."

"And the communications?" asked Thaymes.

"Short-range is workable. Our people are also installing a long-range beacon that will, hopefully, allow us to keep tabs on the planet for years to come."

"Sounds good to me," Myri sighed. "Then we won't have to chase this kriffing thing down every other decade."

"Indeed," Kre'fey grunted. "Well, we should begin survey work."

"I'll get an EV crew ready," Syal looked at the two Wraiths. "I'll let you know when they're out. You can help provide diagnostics from this end."

"Aye aye, captain," Myri tipped her sister an informal salute.

Syal nodded in reply, then walked out of the room, Kre'fey followed, and Jag followed him. When he got into the hallway Syal was already walking ahead at a clipped, determined pace. Jagged was still not used to how unlike the Antilles sisters were. Myri, with her multi-colored hair, casual demeanor, and party-girl reputation, stood in stark contrast to Syal's sober military reserve.

It was a strange comparison to Jag's own sister. When he was young, he had been the determined, professional soldier, while Wyn had exhibited a wild free spirit rarely seen in Chiss society. Jagged had never considered himself wild *or* free-spirited, but twenty years later Wyn seemed to see him that way, while she herself acted like the perfect Chiss naval officer.

It didn't *feel* like their roles had been reversed, not exactly, but they had certainly changed. He thought, with a tinge of sadness, that things might have been different if Davin, Cheriss, Chak, or Cem had survived. All of them, some of them, *any* of them, it didn't matter. Maybe then his family would seem less... broken.

"You seem pensive," Kre'fey muttered.

Jag realized he'd slowed his pace as he walked down the hall. "Sorry. Just feeling a little weak."

"Have you recovered from your ordeal on *Phoenix*?" Kre'fey asked. "As much as possible, I mean."

Jag resisted the urge to touch the black patch strapped over his left eye. The patch still itched sometimes, and the strap pinched the skin of his forehead. His vision seemed strangely flat also, and he had to crane his head to the left more often. He would probably get used to it all eventually, just like his father had. He didn't know why the thought made him uneasy.

"I'm managing," Jag said at last. Thankfully, Kre'fey was walking on his right side. "I'm still hoping to get a prosthetic once this is all over."

"Of course," Kre'fey said. The old Bothan looked like he wanted to say more, then trailed off.

"Are *you* all right?" Jag asked. He didn't know how to approach Kre'fey. Fifteen years ago he'd served under the Bothan, looked up to him as an exemplary commander. Now his tactical mind still seemed sharp, but time had worn away the charisma and vigor that had made him such a good admiral.

He was half-hoping Kre'fey would brush aside his query, just as he had Kre'fey's. Instead, as they drew closer to the turbolight, the ex-admiral said, "May we talk in private, Commander?"

"Of course," Jag nodded. When the elevator arrived, he punched in the deck where his ready room was located. The two of them rode to their destination in awkward silence.

Jagged's ready room was about a quarter of the size of his office as Imperial Head of State, but he liked it more. The desk, the shelf of datapads, and the soft-backed chair felt relatively informal and relaxed. He pulled two chairs in front of the desk, sat down in one, and beckoned Kre'fey to do the same.

The Bothan settled down in the chair opposite Jag. His violet eyes seemed to scour the room, resting on everything but Jag himself. Jag had learned enough about Bothan body language to tell he was troubled.

"May I ask what's bothering you, admiral?"

"I'm no admiral," the Bothan shook his head.

"Still," said Jag, "What is it?"

Kre'fey finally faced Jag, but his vision still hovered somewhere above the human's shoulder. He asked, "When you were captive aboard *Phoenix*, did you talk with Bren Aref'ja?"

Ah, of course. The entire reason Kre'fey had joined them on this quest into the Unknown Regions was because his former protege was leading the renegade fleet.

"I did speak to him, though he wasn't in the room when Boba Fett did *this* to me." Jag pointed to his eyepatch.

"That's more than I've done in... oh, at least five years," Kre'fey leaned forward. "Tell me, how did he seem?"

Jagged thought about that. Aref'ja had come to him and asked him to join the renegade fleet. It was the kind of obvious offer made to any prisoner, the carrot before the stick. When Jag refused, as they both knew he would, the stick came out. The threats of torture, delivered not with malice or sadistic zest but with a tone of reluctance. At first Jag had thought it feigned, but as he replayed the scene in memory he began to suspect that Aref'ja had, in fact, been saddened and squeamish at the thought of torture.

"He seemed trapped," Jag said.

Kre'fey ears twitched. "I don't understand."

"No, not trapped. He seemed like he was *scared*. Like he was on a wild land speeder that was veering out of control and he was clinging on as hard as he could, because as dangerous as the ride is, falling off would be even worse."

The edges of Kre'fey mouth drooped in a Bothan frown. "Bren isn't just along for the ride. He *is* the ride. It's *his* landspeeder."

"You haven't experienced Natasi Daala," Jag said. "But I think there was more than that. Can you tell me about Aref'ja, as you knew him?"

"I've known him for some time," Kre'fey said guardedly. "He was the finest officer I had during the war. Intelligent, dutiful, loyal. Everything we train them to be at the academy."

"Was he with you on *Ralroost*?"

"Early on, yes. He was with us at Ithor, though by the time you rejoined us, Commander, he had his own ship and was fighting the Yuuzhan Vong on the Mid and Outer Rim. He saw... many horrible things there."

"We all saw horrible things during the war," Jag said. "From what I saw of him, he *still* seemed like a model officer. That's why I had a hard time figuring out why he, of all the beings in

the galaxy, went off to exterminate the Vong. We've checked into his record. His family was on Bothawui the whole time, and they weren't harmed. Was there something specific that happened in the Outer Rim?"

Kre'fey looked down at his paws and gave a long, heavy sigh. "Commander, what I am about to tell you is very personal. I would prefer if it doesn't leave this room."

"All right." Jag stiffened. "Go on."

"Bren was not just my finest officer. He was almost my family."

"Your family?"

"The Kre'feys are an illustrious clan," the old Bothan said. "Many seek to marry into it in the hopes of basking in the favors our good name provides. But Bren wasn't like that. He was very much in love with Evyn. My sister."

Jag searched his memory. "I'm sorry... I didn't realize you had a sister."

"Of course not. You were on the far side of the galaxy when she died on Coruscant."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Admiral."

"I'm no admiral," Kre'fey shook his head. "But I was, of course, when I introduced Evyn to my fine subordinate. Things progressed quickly. They became both... very much in love."

"You're saying something changed in him after the fall of Coruscant."

"Something changed in all of us," Kre'fey said firmly. His violet eyes flicked up to hold Jag's. "When the Bothan government declared ar'krai, total war against the Yuuzhan Vong, I was overjoyed. I wanted to make them pay for what they'd done to Coruscant, to Evyn, even to my cousin. The Combined Clans' declaration was beautiful, because it lifted any heavy cloak of moral responsibility and unleashed the inner predator within our race."

"I remember," Jag said evenly. For most of time he'd spent aboard *Ralroost*, Kre'fey had been an exuberant force, urging his men and women to hurt the Yuuzhan Vong through any means possible. It had definitely helped overall morale, but inside Jag had shared the moral qualms his Jedi friends had expressed more openly.

Kre'fey exhaled. "The responsibilities of command, and the quandary of putting an end to the war with minimal bloodshed, forced me to temper the bloodlust I once had. Other Bothans, Bren among them, continued to cultivate the race-hatred of ar'krai within their hearts."

"Not just Bothans," Jagged said. "Hate is... a hard thing to let go of."

"Not just hate," Kre'fey's eyes flared again. "What of *your* sister, Commander Fel? What of the secret she has locked away in *Celestial's* laboratory? Do you think those Chiss medics down on Zonama Sekot brought the Alpha Red agent with them?"

"She's given me assurance that she will not use it without consulting me first."

"And do you trust your sister?"

"I also told her I would shoot her down if she tried."

"Answer my question. Do you trust her?"

His jaw clamped shut. He knew the answer, but it hurt too much to say it.

Kre'fey shook his head. "Evyn and I were quite different, but we trusted one another. Those two Antilles girls, they trust each other. And love each other very deeply, I think."

Jag didn't know if he loved Wynssa. He had once, when he'd been the strict one and she'd been the keeper of his free spirit. Now the situation was reversed, or something close, and he did not like the parts of his past that seemed to have flowered in his sister.

He said, "We were not raised in a society that places value on love."

"Nor was I," Kre'fey nodded. "But we do not have to be what our people expect us to be. We make our own choices. You, me. Bren."

"I know," Jagged exhaled a long, painful breath he hadn't known he was holding. "What about Aref'ja? When the time comes, when you and he meet again, what choice do you think *he* will make?"

"I don't know," Kre'fey said sadly. "But I am prepared to do whatever I have to for the sake of my mission."

Jag nodded in wordless agreement. That was something he shared with Kre'fey, and with his sister too.

She stood on the grassy hilltop, bare feet on soft damp earth, and wondered if she belonged here.

Tahiri Veila had called a lot of places home. Tatooine, Yavin 4, Ossus, even Coruscant, though the busy city-world had never felt like a place where she belonged. She'd spent five years on Zonama Sekot, helping Danni Quee and Harrar bring peace to a shattered society while she helped mend together her shattered self. Looking back, things had all started going downhill when she left Zonama Sekot.

Ever since she'd left, she'd been overcome by the desire to *get back*. Not just to the planet, but back further still, to those brief moments of youth when she'd had Anakin at her side and she'd capable of taking on the Yuuzhan Vong and the entire galaxy, so long as they were together. That overwhelming need to *get back* had pulled her ever-deeper into desperation and darkness, and made her do things the Tahiri whom Anakin had loved would never have condoned.

Now she was here again. So much had changed, both on the planet and inside herself, but it still felt so very peaceful to stand on the crest of the hill overlooking the Middle Distance, admiring the endless rolling hills draped in bora trees, the gleam of distant lakes, the lazy passing of fat white clouds across a vast blue sky.

It was almost enough to make her forget the things she'd done since she last stood here.

Almost.

Jaina had left that morning for the hyperdrives, taking with her *Mando* buddies and most of Wraith Squadron. That left Tahiri in town with Danni, Harrar, and most troubling of all, Ben Skywalker.

Ben himself wasn't troubled, not any more. *That* was what troubled Tahiri. He'd explained to her and Jaina both the encounter he'd had in the forest, first with Zonama Sekot materialized as a child, and then with his deceased mother. He'd been certain, dead certain, that the image of Mara Jade had been a real Force-specter, not another projection of Sekot's.

Somehow she must have been summoned by the living planet itself.

And *that* was worrying on many levels. If Sekot had summoned the ghost of Mara Jade Skywalker, perhaps pulling on some tether of their previous meeting, who else would follow? Jacen Solo? The enigmatic Vergere?

Was it possible, however unlikely, that the planet might summon the ghost of Anakin Solo?

The very thought had made Tahiri's chest freeze up. She'd gone for a long walk to sort out her thoughts, but as she stared at the forests and hills, cool breeze stinging her face, she was no closer to an answer.

She didn't know which she'd prefer, seeing Anakin or not seeing him. He'd been the bright center of her life, and everything since his death, even the five years of healing on Zonama Sekot, had been poisoned by his bittersweet memory. Their brief time as lovers, between the fall of Yavin 4 and the mission to Myrkr, had been the peak of her life, and everything else was just a long downhill walk, constantly looking over her shoulder at the heights she'd climbed down from.

How could she face Anakin, after all the things she'd done? How could she tell him what Jacen Solo had turned into, let alone what horrible things Tahiri had done to help Anakin's brother? How could she explain that she had killed and tortured and betrayed the people who loved her, all because of her awful desperate *need* just to spend a little more time with the boy she'd loved half a life ago?

Anakin would probably forgive her. Anakin could forgive everything. He was greater even than Ben Skywalker in his capacity for understanding, love, and forgiveness. Tahiri did not have that capability. Regret, like the memory of Anakin Solo, was just something she had to live with now.

The soft earth was still a comfort beneath her bare feet. When she'd first come to Yavin 4 to train as a Jedi, she'd insisted on going everywhere barefoot, even the messy jungle. It was something she'd never experienced on Tatooine and every step brought new sensation, discovery. Growing older, she'd slowly weaned herself off the practice, and after joining herself with Nen Yim's implanted memories, she'd given it up entirely.

But over time, she'd started going barefoot again. She hadn't thought much about it at first, but looking back she realized it must have been an unconscious attempt to get back just a bit of what she'd lost from her youth; a minor, benign version of the same urge that had dragged her down Darth Caedus's wake. Realizing that, she'd tried to get back in the habit of wearing boots again, but right here, right now, on this grassy hilltop, it felt wrong not to touch this world any way she could.

She was pondering the beautiful scene when she heard someone call her name behind her. She turned and looked down the hill, toward the town. A tall blond woman, hair bound at the nape of her neck, was walking toward her, followed by a Yuuzhan Vong dressed not in the organic fibers or light armor common to his people, but a synthetic gray jumpsuit.

Picking up her boots with one hand, Tahiri stepped off the hilltop and walked down the slope. A large cloud passed overhead, obscuring the sun.

"There you are," Jesmin Tainer said. "I heard you were still in town."

"It's good to see you again, both of you" Tahiri said, and she meant it.

Onboard *Starless* she'd spent time with both Jesmin and the human-raised Yuuzhan Vong, Scut. She'd found herself identifying with Jesmin's wandering life (Jedi drop-out, Antarian Ranger, bounty hunter, Wraith operative) and with Scut's conflicted human-Yuuzhan Vong nature, and was glad to have both of them on the planet. Besides, they were a distraction from her thoughts about Anakin.

"I thought most of your people went with Jaina," she said.

"They did," Jesmin put her hands on her hips, nudging the lightsaber attached to her belt. "It's just us. Sharr wanted me to watch the comm system while Scut got acquainted."

Tahiri looked at the Yuuzhan Vong. She had half a guess as to what he was feeling now, like he was at once coming home and wandering into something more alien than he could possibly imagine. She asked, "Well, how is it?"

Scut's face, gray and smooth, bereft of the tattoos and scars typical of his people, seemed even more childlike as he looked

around the hillside. Finally, his eyes settled on Tahiri and he said, "I should have come a long time ago."

Tahiri smiled tightly and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, you're here now. What do you think?"

"I think... I have so much to learn. I've spent some time I one of their daumuteks, with some of their shapers. They've been working to stabilize the biosphere after the damage from the last jump. The things they've discovered, comparing Sekotan biology to Yuuzhan Vong life... It's fascinating. I'm surprised more scientists didn't come here before."

"The Yuuzhan Vong like their privacy," Tahiri reminded him. "So does Sekot."

"Yes, I understand." Scut looked a little sullen. "They're unsure what to do with me. I'm like them, but *not* like them at all. And they seem... Strange to me as well."

"That's only natural," Tahiri said softly. "But they *are* part of you, even the things that seem strange or ugly. Denying that can only hurt you. Believe me."

"I do. And I think I am getting used to it... slowly."

"Well, relax," Jesmin grinned. "You've only been here less than a day."

"Who knows how much time we'll have?" Scut looked up at the clouds drifting overhead, like he was trying to see the stars and the fleets beyond.

"Come on," Tahiri said as a strong breeze chilled her. "Let's go back to the town."

They agreed, and after Tahiri put her boots on, they walked down the hill, through the long blowing grass, until they were amidst the clusters of low domed buildings. They had been grown with no discernable pattern. The streets were winding and haphazard, usually unpaved. It was unlike Coruscant in every way, and that was enough to make Tahiri feel better.

When they returned to Danni Quee's building, they found the Magister sitting down on the floor, talking quietly to Harrar and Ben. The red-haired young man looked up and asked, "Where'd you find her?"

"Up on a hill, taking in the view," Jesmin replied.

"Did you need me for something?" Tahiri asked, looking from Danni to Harrar.

The old Yuuzhan Vong priest bobbed his head. "Perhaps. We were speaking with your young friend, Scut, about shaper's matters."

"The Magister is very knowledgeable," Scut nodded.

"Well, I *was* a scientist in a past life," Danni laughed softly.

"I thought you were an astrophysicist," Ben said.

"I was," Danni said. "Then I had to... adapt."

"The Magister was the first of your galaxy to encounter the Praetorite Vong," Harrar said grimly. "At least, the only one of that initial group to survive. The fact that she has found it in her heart to forgive us, to stay with us..."

Danni reached out and placed a palm on his gray brittle hand. "It's all right. I'm happy with what happened."

Tahiri wasn't sure about that; Danni betrayed palpable irritation at having been ignored by Sekot, and clearly blamed herself in part for the departure of the True Honor faction. Despite all that, the smile on her face was genuine; there was no place in the galaxy Danni Queen would rather be than Zonama Sekot.

Tahiri took a seat on the carpet. Ben and Danni scooted slightly to make room for Scut and Jesmin.

"So," Tahiri asked, "What did you need *me* for?"

"A possibility has occurred to us," Harrar fixed her with his dark, deep-set eyes. "I trust Jaina Solo and your technicians from the Alliance to fix the hyperdrive machinery. However, that may not be enough."

Tahiri raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"This world is part natural, part mechanical," Scut said. "Everything stays in balance. It works despite those differences. Those hyperdrives might not work unless the natural *and* the biological are working in sync."

"Haven't your shapers already looked at the hyperdrive?"

"They have," said Harrar, "And they are at the site now. However, just as our working mechanics were not enough, so our shapers might need additional help."

Tahiri stared at Scut. The Yuuzhan Vong was a brilliant amateur biologist, but he only had a day's experience with Zonama Sekot.

Sensing her thoughts, Scut shook his head. "Not me. She suggested we find someone else. Someone... hard to get to."

Tahiri's jaw dropped. She stared at Harrar. "You can't be serious. Not *her*!"

Harrar nodded. "She is our most brilliant shaper."

"She's a war criminal," Tahiri said harshly.

As the last Master Shaper during the Yuuzhan Vong War, Qelah Kwaad had created horrible monstrosities that claimed thousands of Alliance lives, most notably the horrible armored Slayer soldiers who had defended Shimmra's palace.

Beneath her obvious revulsion, Tahiri held a still-deeper resentment to Qelah Kwaad. It had been her relative, Mezhan Kwaad, who had captured Tahiri on Yavin 4 all those years ago, cut into her brain, and filled it with the memories of so-called Riina Kwaad. Tahiri had thanked her by cutting her head from her shoulders.

"Qelah Kwaad was a great help to us immediately after the war," Harrar reminded her. "She helped grow new towns like the one we are in now."

"For a couple years. Then she went crazy and wandered off into the mountains. Do we even know where she *is*?"

"We have reports," Danni spoke up. "It seems that she hadn't left her daumutek in the Blue Mountains in over ten years."

"Sithspawn." Tahiri shook her head. Traipsing through the forest to try and recruit a mad shaper, one who had already brought so much pain to the galaxy, was not what she expected to be doing today. "Honestly, I'd have thought she'd have joined True Honor."

"Not her," Harrar said. "It was her successor as Master Shaper, Vilath Dal."

Tahiri remembered him. Tall, proud, intelligent. He'd also kept to himself, and Tahiri had never gotten a good read on him.

"Do you know if he had any contact with Qelah Kwaad before he left with True Honor?" she asked.

"None that we could see," Danni said, then added, "I admit we could have kept better watch on him, though."

"What's past is past," Harrar consoled. "Right now we have to look to the future."

“And the future involves Qelah Kwaad?” asked Tahiri, still skeptical.

“It very well might,” said Harrar. “Our situation is dire. I believe it is worth trying.”

Tahiri looked to Danni for appeal, but the Magister nodded in agreement.

“Okay,” Tahiri sighed. She looked at Scut. “Pack your kit, then. I guess we're going on a trip.”

“We will send a guide with you,” said Harrar.

“Be my guest.” Tahiri rose to her feet, as did Scut and Jesmin. As Ben stood up he asked, “Where do I fit in in all this?”

“You should stay in town, Ben,” Tahiri said, and glanced at Jesmin. “You too. Watch over the comm system. Help Danni and Harrar with whatever they need. Keep in touch with Jaina.”

“Sounds good,” Jesmin nodded. She clearly had no desire to go trekking through the Blue Mountains.

As the four of them started for the door, Danni said, “Tahiri, could you wait a moment?”

Tahiri had a feeling this conversation was also going to be awkward, but she said, “Sure. Go on ahead, guys. Scut, I'll meet you at the comm center.”

Scut nodded and left. Jesmin followed, then Ben. Tahiri watched his face for some hint of the coming conversation but he seemed to know nothing. When they were gone, she sat back down on the carpet with Danni and Harrar.

“Well?” she asked, placing her hands on her knees.

“We have heard from Ben that he saw his mother in the forest,” Danni said evenly. “He said that Sekot appeared as a child and guided him to her.”

“If that's what Ben says, I believe him.”

Danni nodded, though she looked unhappy that Sekot had, again, appeared to manifest itself to someone other than her. She said, “Tahiri, what happened to Mara Jade? What happened to Jacen Solo?”

There it was, the obvious question, the one she knew was coming but prayed she wouldn't have to answer. But now Danni and Harrar were staring at her, expectant, needing. She

had no right to hide this information from her. She trusted them with her life; she could certainly trust them with this horrible knowledge.

"Please," said Harrar. "Tell us how such great Jedi could fall."

Tahiri closed her eyes, exhaled.

Then she told them everything.

She told them about how Jacen had changed after his five-year journey to discover new things about the Force. She spoke of the Swarm War, and how he'd tricked his fellow Jedi into a preemptive attack on the Chiss. Then came the Corellian Crisis, and the Second Civil War. She talked about how Jacen had trained Ben in the Galactic Alliance Guard, taking him on secret police raids. She said that Jacen sought to bring peace to the galaxy by apprenticing himself to a Sith named Lumiya, and that when Mara Jade found out she went after Jacen to kill him. Jacen had, in turn, killed his aunt and become Darth Caedus.

Then she told how them Caedus had taken control of the Alliance, turning it into an instrument of terror just like his grandfather had, until he was hunted down and killed by his own sister. The one bright light in all of this was Jacen's daughter Allana, born from his hidden lover and childhood friend Tenel Ka.

Tahiri did not talk about her own role in this; how her desire to see Anakin and her longtime friendship with Jacen had turned her into a Sith witch who murdered old men and helpless prisoners. She could only say so much.

When she was done, Danni Quee was weeping silently. Harrar's eyes were black marbles in his ashen face.

"Now you understand," she told them. Her eyes and throat were dry. "Jaina doesn't talk about him, ever. Ben... Ben's strong, but he's lost so much."

"I had no idea," Danni croaked. "I wish... I wish I could have seen him, one last time. I wish I could have *told* him."

Tahiri only nodded. The pain of words left unsaid had haunted her half her life.

"It all makes sense now," a soft voice said behind them.

All three heads spun to see a teenage girl with three scars on her forehead perched on one of the shelves jutting from the daumutek wall.

Tahiri stared. It was her, and yet not. Fifteen years ago, when she'd first come here, she had been battered but unbroken, confused but seeking clarity, hopeful despite all she'd lost. She'd been smooth-skinned and bright-eyed and bare-footed.

Staring at the image before her was like seeing the clock turned back on half her life.

"Sekot!" Danni's voice broke. She sounded like she was about to cry again. "You're back. You're really-"

The image of young Tahiri held up a hand. "It's all right, Danni. Really. I haven't forgotten you."

Something rattled in Tahiri's chest. It felt so strange to hear your own voice.

"But I thought-" Danni stuttered, "You just went away, and I thought you were angry, or-"

"I'm sad," the living world said. "There's so much in this universe to be sad about. So much hatred. Pain. Loss. None of it is fair. But we have to keep moving, or we'll be stuck in the past forever."

"Sekot," Tahiri said, then froze.

She wanted to know why the living world had chosen her image to appear as. The image of her past self, still unbroken by Darth Caedus, filled her with awful, aching nostalgia to go back to what was. Standing before her now was the image of everything she'd longed to return to for the past fifteen years; everything she'd gone dark in the hope of getting back.

"How did you bring forth the ghost of Mara Jade Skywalker?" Harrar asked behind her.

"You can see her?" Tahiri jerked in shock.

Sekot projected images through the Force. Harrar could not touch the Force and should not have been able to see this projection. In the past, whenever Sekot had wished to speak to the Yuuzhan Vong, it had spoken directly through the mouths of Danni or the old Magister, Jabitha.

Tahiri watched her younger self chuckle and hop off the shelf. The shelf creaked with the alleviation of weight, and two bare feet slapped softly on the floor.

"That's impossible," Tahiri gaped. "How did you-"

"I've been discovering new things about myself lately," her simulacrum said. "I've learned to touch the Force in new ways, even manipulate matter."

"So... If I touched you..."

"What about Mara Jade Skywalker?" Harrar asked.

"That is something else I've been learning." The girl's face smiled ambiguously. "The line between life and death is never absolute, not with the Force."

"Could you-" Tahiri's words caught. She couldn't say it, couldn't ask it. She felt as pathetic, needy, and helpless as she had before Darth Caedus. She was like a spice addict dreaming of a fix. Just the thought, the hope of touching Anakin's spirit threatened to ruin her again.

Her own face smiled knowingly. "It's all right, Tahiri. And Danni, and Harrar. I haven't forgotten about you."

"But there's so much happening!" Danni said. "There is a fleet out there trying to kill us. And True Honor, they-"

"It doesn't matter," the girl said firmly. "What I'm doing is more important."

"More *important*?" spat Danni. "There are hundreds of thousands of beings on this planet, beings who trust you, need you, *worship* you!"

"I haven't forgotten them," the young Tahiri said. "But recent trauma has... awakened things in me. I can see things now. Beyond life and death, past and present, good and evil. I wonder if this is how Jacen felt when he saved the galaxy from Onimi..."

A strange, sad smile appeared on the girl's face. "A dragon is coming. He won't fall easily. I have to be prepared."

"A dragon?" Danni said. "What dragon? Sekot, I don't understand."

"Don't worry, Magister," the girl said. "You will."

And then she was gone. Like she'd never been there at all.

An awful silence fell over the room. Danni choked back more tears. Harrar lowered his head and looked very, very tired. And Tahiri did not know what to feel. Confusion, hope, desire, despair, and a painful nostalgia all warred within her. She'd come to Sekot thinking it might be a place of refuge from all

her regrets, all she'd done in the past five years. Instead it had brought her face-to-face with them all.

When she, too, lowered her head, she couldn't keep the tears from flowing.

Chapter 8

For some time after joining the True Honor movement, Master Shaper Vilath Dal had been uncertain as to whether this was the correct path for him. It was hardly a choice that could be un-made, and he had no intention of slinking back to Zonama Sekot and begging forgiveness (though his fellow Yuuzhan Vong had gone so weak on the forest world they might actually take him back). It was, however, very plain that he was unlike the other True Honor members.

For one, most of them were warriors. It was no surprise that they made up the bulk of a dissident movement aimed at taking the Yuuzhan Vong away from the peaceful, sedentary, agricultural lives imposed on them by the Jedi on Zonama Sekot. There were no Shamed Ones (though they called themselves Extolled now, none of the other castes paid much attention to their pretensions of equality). Some of the intendant caste had joined, yes, but they were surprisingly few priests among them. High Priest Harrar had done a thorough job of filling the religious hierarchy with priests who shared his vision of a peaceful life on their prison-planet, this strange mocking seed of Yuuzhan'tar.

There were a few shapers who had joined the warriors in the True Honor movement, and only one Master Shaper who had actually took part in the way against the Jedi fifteen years ago. That shaper was Vilath Dal.

To be fair, Vilath Dal had not been a Master Shaper then. He had been an apprentice for most of the conflict, and had been

elevated to the full rank of Shaper on the heels of his mentor, Qelah Kwaad, during the last stages of the war. As a young scientist, he had been thrilled to assist her in developing the Slayers, the elite bio-engineered warriors who had valiantly defending Yuuzhan'tar against the Jedi invasion. All of his life he had been driven not by the warriors' bloodlust, the priests' fanaticism, or the intendant's ambition. He'd been driven by curiosity, nothing more or nothing less. Master Kwaad had once told him he was the ideal shaper.

In the beginning, after their forced relocation to Zonama Sekot, he had assisted his master in exploring the mysteries of this world, so like Yuuzhan'tar of old yet so utterly different. He'd been thrilled by this discovery, but had grown frustrated as the years went on. They could analyze every plant they found, map every genome, take apart every animal, and they still came no closer to discovering what made Zonama Sekot special. They had been forced to conclude that the mysterious power the Jedi worshiped, which the Yuuzhan Vong were unable to touch, must have been the key. Master Kwaad had despaired and made herself an anchorite in the wilderness. But Vilath Dal was a born shaper, and his curiosity was never sated.

So in the end he'd joined True Honor, this ragged angry movement of brutish, blood-hungry warriors, not for revenge against the Jedi, but because it offered him a chance to do something *new*.

It was all about the company they kept.

Vilath Dal now stood in the laboratory of the Sith vessel with their scientist Dician, examining their leader's latest medical evaluation. It was beginning to feel like a second home.

The first time he'd come aboard this Sith vessel (which they called *Revenge*, much to the warriors' approval), he'd been dazed and fascinated. He had been aboard infidel ships before, and they were nothing like this. Darth Wyyrlok had called it 'Rakatan,' after the ancient race that had grown it thousands of years ago. Its winding hallways, faintly luminous with the pulsing of veins and capillaries beneath its skin, recalled the insides of Yuuzhan Vong ships but were also utterly different. Dician said that this living ship existed in the Dark Side of the Force, and was powered by it in some way.

Vilath Dal had always been skeptical of the Force. He'd seen Jedi do tricks, but otherwise they seemed the same as any other being native to this galaxy. The Jedi he and Master Kwaad had dissected had looked the same inside as all the other humanoids they'd cut apart. Empirically, he could admit that the Jedi, and now these Sith, drew on *some* ethereal power to perform their tricks, but he was still eminently skeptical of some all-embracing energy that, if channeled properly, could both bring a planet to life and power an ancient warship. Like many shapers, he felt the same skepticism toward the Yuuzhan Vong gods, though it was a belief they rarely voiced aloud, even to each other.

After spending months with Dician aboard *Revenge*, he'd come to respect her knowledge and even accept some limits to his understanding. The hours spent with her, alone, had justified the decision to join True Honor. Together, they had combined their different scientific lineages and solved problems for mutual benefit. Dician had helped him develop biots that rejuvenated the many old Yuuzhan Vong warships the Sith had scoured from the far corners of the galaxy. He, in turn, worked with her to modify the vonduun crab armor that had been grafted onto her master, Darth Krayt, during his time as a Yuuzhan Vong prisoner fifty years ago.

Working with Krayt had been a revelation. The vonduun crab armor had formed a symbiosis unlike anything he'd ever seen. The living armor and the living human were at once feeding off one another yet also locked in mortal combat. The sheer willpower of Darth Krayt (and perhaps his Force magic too) had kept the armor from completely taking control of his mind and body, while the armor, in grafting itself to his skin and organs, had prolonged his beyond that of a normal human.

It was also helping to heal him from whatever grievous injury he had sustained; Dician had withheld the details. If either Krayt or his armor overpowered the other, both would perish. The difference was that Krayt was a sentient being who understood limits, whereas the armor sought only to consume.

Now, after filling the void in Krayt's body left by his wound, the armor seemed that it was finally, at last, getting the upper hand.

Dician and Vilath Dal both understood. They'd been trying different treatments for months, but nothing could advance the armor's parasitic advance into Krayt's body. They had explained the situation to Krayt as well, but not to any of the other Sith or Yuuzhan Vong. The three of them had agreed to keep it a secret for now, lest the knowledge get out and sow discord in their fragile alliance.

Working with the Sith was a joy and revelation, but Krayt's illness had also brought him face-to-face with something he'd been in denial of all his life. He may have been a born shaper, but he was not a *great* shaper. He knew in his heart that Master Kwaad could have done what he could not. She could have restored the equilibrium and saved Krayt.

They reviewed the information from Krayt's most recent examination. Dician was scanning through the data on a holographic projector. If any of the True Honor warriors saw this they'd call Vilath Dal a blasphemer, but he didn't care. Dician's mechanical tools were just as valid as his qahsa and villip, sometimes moreso. What mattered was the ends, not the means to get there.

However, what they saw now was not encouraging, not at all. If this was the end they were heading for, they were doomed.

"How long do you think?" Vilath Dal asked. The tentacles in his headdress writhed, betraying his agitation though his face was stony and cold.

"A week, perhaps," Dician said as he looked at the readout. "After that he will fall into his last sleep. A healing coma will help him resist the armor's effects, but even though, it should overcome him in about a month."

"The parasite armor is designed to overtake its host," Vilath Dal said. "However, it was designed for Yuuzhan Vong life forms. There is not way your master would survive. It would kill him and the parasite both." He snorted and shook his head. "We should have designed smarter beings, but our shapers followed the orthodoxy laid down by the priests and Shimmra for too long."

"It's not your fault," Dician said sternly. "And there must still be a way to save him. Every problem has a solution. Every disease has a cure."

Vilath Dal bore his teeth in bitter imitation of a human smile. "Many of my people would say disease is an affliction from the gods, from which there can be no appeal."

"A few of my people have whispered that Lord Krayt has offended the Force some how," Dician said with equal disdain.

Vilath Dal tilted his head. "Do you disbelieve in the Force, Dician?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I can feel it. Use it, though not as well as the Masters. I do not believe it has a will. I refuse to believe it controls our actions. We control our own. A true Sith doesn't whine about fate, she takes hold of what she wants and wrenches it from the stubborn claws of the universe."

Vilath Dal chuckled. "You would have made a fine Yuuzhan Vong shaper."

"No. Your fashion sense is beyond me." She gestured to his headdress. "Still, this isn't the place for humor. We have to save Lord Krayt and we're running out of time."

"I can return to my ship, run further tests," he said, but that was a lie. He had no hint of anything else he could do for Krayt... except kidnap Qelah Kwaad and bring her here.

He froze. He *could* do that. Zonama Sekot's engines were down. It had no place to go. Master Kwaad herself was almost certainly secluded on the exact same remote mountain she'd locked herself away on years ago.

"What?" Dician asked. "Do you have an idea?"

"Perhaps," Vilath Dal demurred. "It is too soon to say."

She was obviously unsatisfied, but knew when not to press. "Do you want to return to your ship now?"

"Please," he gave a slight bow.

When they stepped out of the lab they were met with their typical honor guard; a half-dozen Yuuzhan Vong warriors on one side of the hallway, and an equal number of black-robed, tattooed Sith on the other. Even Vilath Dal, who was more or less used to it by now, had to admit they made a truly terrifying combination.

He was marched back to the cofferdam that connected to his shuttle. Darth Wyyrlok was not there this time, so he got a farewell salute from the one with the two tall horns sticking out of his head. Then he entered the umbilical and went back to his

ship, six warriors on his heels. He didn't speak to them once the whole way back to his flagship, *Honor Regained*.

At some three kilometers long, *Regained* was the largest Yuuzhan Vong vessel recovered by the Sith scouts. They'd found her floating all the way on the Outer Rim, ten parsecs outside the Belkadan system. It had taken great effort, and almost a hundred implanted biots, to pump lifeblood into her systems. She had proven herself in combat several times already, though, and Vilath Dal was confident she would do so again when the time came. He hoped, however, that this would not be soon.

After his shuttle linked to *Regained*, he boarded the vessel and was greeted by its first officer, Voran Lah. There were more than a few of the deceased Warmaster's Domain here on *Regained*; it seemed they felt they had something to prove. Voran Lah himself was the picture of the fanatic amateur: at only twenty standard years old he was tall and stringy, too young to have fought in the war, yet his face was a hideous mess of scars and tattoos, most of them inflicted in the past six months. Not one but two amphi-staffs writhed around his waist.

When he greeted Vilath Dal he did not bow in deference to his elder, but said simply, "Welcome aboard," with the condescension all too common among the warrior caste too young to have seen actual war.

"Thank you for receiving me," Vilath Dal said, with equal lack of enthusiasm. "Please, take me to Maal Lah. I have something important to discuss with him."

"The Warmaster is on the bridge," Voran Lah said. "He is attending to critical."

"Nothing is more critical than this!" Vilath Dal snapped.

For a second Voran Lah looked frightened, but then he put on a sneered mask. "If you truly insist, I can speak with him. But if he declines—"

"Do it," Vilath Dal said.

Voran Lah stared at the shaper for just long enough that he didn't appear weak in front of his subordinates. Then he took five steps down the hall, stroked the villip on his shoulder to life, and spoke with it in muffled tones. Vilath Dal waited patiently and did not strain to hear. He trusted in the

conversation's outcome. Unlike his lieutenant, Maal Lah was not a fool.

When the conversation was over, Voran Lah walked back and, trying to hide his chagrin, said, "The Warmaster will see you in his command parlor."

"Very good," Vilath Dal nodded, and started down the hall. His six soldiers followed behind him, leaving Voran Lah to watch their backs in consternation.

When he arrived at the command parlor, he found Maal Lah standing before the gemlike lens of the viewport, watching stars and warships drift past slowly outside. The self-proclaimed Warmaster, a distant relative of Tsavong Lah himself, was tall and broad-shouldered, though his face lacked the ritual scarring of so many of his caste. Instead, a myriad of red and blue tattoos writhed across his gray skin, climbing his bare arms, slipping under the black cloak he wore over his shoulders, and slipping up his neck and across his cheeks and forehead.

"*Belek tiu*, Eminence." Vilath Dal said, snapping his wrists against his shoulders.

"Welcome back." Maal Lah turned around and took a step toward the shaper. He moved with a slight hobble; he had once lost a leg fighting the enemy at Ylesia, and the replacement had never grafted quite right. During the war, Tsavong Lah had lost a leg and nearly been killed by a corrupt replacement, put on by one of Vilath Dal's own Domain. Maal Lah, however, was not one to hold to blood feuds. He had welcomed Vilath Dal into True Honor, as well he should have, because a fleet full of warrior-caste thugs needed every good shaper they could get.

"What have you to report?" Maal Lah asked as he came within arms' length of the shaper.

Vilath Dal said, "Unfortunately, the situation with Darth Krayt is at an impasse. The vonduun armor threatens to consume his body. He will probably slip into a coma within a week, and die thereafter."

Maal Lah scowled. "And what comes of our alliance then?"

"Oh, I think we could slaughter the Sith if we had to, but it would be quite costly. Say, twenty of ours for every Dark Lord."

"Is that a joke?"

"No, it is not," Vilath Dal said gravely. "However, I do have another idea. It is rather unorthodox, but if you agree to it, we must move quickly."

Maal Lah regarded him carefully. "Just say what you wish, shaper."

"I propose a return to Zonama Sekot," he said.

Maal Lah's eyes went wide. "For what purpose?"

"Healing Krayt is beyond my abilities," Vilath Dal admitted.

"However, I'm convinced my master could do it."

"Qelah Kwaad? The old witch has been hiding in the mountains for years. Likely she has gone mad."

"Even mad she is the most brilliant member of our race alive. If she can't save Krayt, it cannot be done."

"And how do you propose we get her? Fly into Zonama's orbit and ask politely?"

"It will require a raid," Vilath Dal admitted. "I know where to find her, so I can lead. I suggest we send a wounded ship, begging to surrender, as a feint."

"They are fools, but they are not stupid. They will never accept it."

"They don't have to accept. They only have to hesitate long enough for us to get into orbit." Vilath Dal let his eyes drift over Maal Lah's shoulder, to the drifting stars and warships. "What of the beacon?"

"The beacon still transmits, best we can tell," Maal Lah said. "We have not dislodged the enemy missile from its place inside *Heart of Flame*."

"Yet they have not attacked."

"They would be fools to. Our combined fleet outnumbered theirs."

This was true, though most of the vessels recovered and resurrected with biots were under-manned, and their crew disproportionately made up of inexperienced young fanatics like Voran Lah.

Moreover, they lacked any of the yammosk war coordinators that had been vital to battles of the last war. He did not know what kind of crew the renegade fleet possessed, but he would

bet most of them were actual veterans of the war, not angry youths.

“Perhaps,” said Vilath Dal, “We should send *Heart of Flame* as our damaged ship.”

Maal Lah's face showed surprise, then consideration. He said, “We do not know what would happen if the renegades attack Zonama Sekot. The world may yet cling to dreams of peace and refuse to defend itself.”

“And what if it does not?”

Maal Lah scowled. Like many in True Honor, he clung to the belief that their military victories would draw more of their people away from Zonama Sekot and out into the galaxy to make war once again.

That was one reason that they had not attacked the living world thus far. There was also a strong reluctance on the part of many Yuuzhan Vong to harm their own kind, even the naïve ones who sided with Harrar. Finally, they knew Sekot was perfectly capable of defeating a whole fleet if it summoned the willpower.

“All right,” the shaper shrugged. “If it needs help, we can bring our fleet in and smash the enemy’s. We will become saviors of the entire Yuuzhan Vong race and they will all flock to join us and take war to the stars again. Is that to your liking?”

“It is,” Maal Lah admitted. “But such a feat would carry... certain risks.”

Vilath Dal bore his teeth in another imitation of a humanoid smile. “Come, Warmaster. Surely you know that without risk, there can be no reward?”

Chapter 9

The Sekotan shuttle banked over the vanes of the planet's hyperdrive engines. Three massive durasteel shafts, round and pointed at the tip, rose hundreds of meters in the air. They emerged from deep chasms of machinery that burrowed deep into the planet itself. The engines were a surreal sight, not just for their scale, but for the way they emerged from nothing. There were no cities, no towns for miles in any direction, only low rolling hills covered in high grass.

The man who had once been Bardan Jusik and now called himself Gotab stared out the shuttle's porthole in awe. Just when he thought this strange world couldn't surprise him any more, it went and did it.

"We're coming in for landing," the pilot, a blue-skinned Ferroan, reported.

"Copy that," said Jaina Solo. The slim, dark-haired Jedi was seated in the co-pilot seat, and she turned around to look at the peoples seated along the benches in the cargo hold. "Everyone okay back there?"

"Bright and shiny, Goddess," said the white-haired man closest to the cockpit. He was on the far side of middle age, but he still had youthful eyes and a teasing smile. Next to him was a red-skinned Devaronian and, incongruously, a shaggy Wookiee female.

Jaina just rolled her eyes, shifted her position, and looked at the people on the other bench. "Are we good?"

"Good as we'll ever be," Mereel Skirata said. Like Gotab, the old clone was entranced by the approaching hyperdrive vanes.

Gotab still wasn't sure why Jaina Solo had insisted they all come with her. To keep an eye on them, most likely. Gotab had lived as long as he had by not being trusting, so he didn't hold it against her. Mereel had been an expert slicer in his youth, and he was still good at cryptography, but he knew nothing about fixing engines, normal- or super-sized. Jendri was a pilot and might know something. Bess was more of a run-and-gun type, not a tinkerer. And then there was Venku, *Kad'ika*, sitting stiffly on the bench, looking straight ahead through the forward cockpit viewport. He'd regained basic locomotion since arriving on Zonama Sekot, but his movements were stiff. He did not speak much, like he was lost in his own thoughts.

As for Gotab, his Mandalorian name might have meant 'Engineer,' but he had no idea how to fix a set of hyperdrive engines like this. From the air they *looked* like typical engines on an immense scale, but he knew the technology required to move an entire planet past lightspeed must be astoundingly complex.

In the end, he found he didn't mind coming along for the ride. He wanted to see more of this strange, fascinating world.

In small, good ways, it reminded him of Mandalore. It had broad open spaces, mountains, forests, lakes. Even its town and cities seemed humble, unspoiled by the pretensions of civilization. It was less industrialized than Mandalore, but as he'd gotten older Gotab had cared less and less for machines and more and more for unspoiled nature.

The shuttle circled around the landing site located between the three massive vanes. When it finally settled in its berth, the hatch on the roof of the cargo hold opened and a pair of Ferroans lowered a ladder for them to climb out of.

Gotab would have greatly preferred a landing ramp, but apparently Sekot liked to tax the strength of old men. Gotab wasn't *that* broke-down, so he pulled himself up rung-upon-rung until he stood on the sleek green hood of the shuttle. Sleek silver vanes rose to dizzying heights on either side, and he craned his neck back to get a good view of the three massive constructions stabbing toward a slightly overcast sky.

"Incredible," the white-haired human said as he came out of the hatch. "Hey Goddess, how long ago were these things built?"

"Sometime during the Old Republic," Jaina's muffled voice came from the hold. The big Wookiee popped out of the hold next, followed by Solo herself.

"Must be a pain to maintain," the human whistled. "Probably a magnet for lightning-strikes, high wind gusts..."

The Wookiee groaned something.

"Huhunnah's right, Sharr," the Devaronian said. "They've got a really sleek, aerodynamic design."

"Still, there's got to be some heavy wind." Sharr muttered.

Gotab turned his attention to his fellow *Mandos*. Per Jaina's request, they were allowed to wear their armor but no helmets, and their faces all looked small and naked as they squinted up at the hyperdrive vanes.

"Well," Bess grunted, "Now I've seen everything."

Mereel nodded. Wind kicked the braids of his long gray hair, making them flail over his shoulders. "You can say that again."

Jaina Solo stood with her hands on her hips and looked around the group. "Okay, here's the plan. Sharr, Huhunna, I want you to check with the work crews in the south vane. Drikall, Mereel, Bess check with the command center by the west vane. See how their diagnostics have been working. Jendri, Gotab, and Venku, check out the north vane."

"And what are you up to?" Sharr crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm doing a little bit of everything," she said.

"Must be hard to be a Goddess."

Jaina sighed. "It always is. C'mon, all of you, get to work."

They descended the stairs one-by-one and walked across the landing deck. The command station, Gotab saw, was a low durasteel bunker right next to the landing pad. As Mereel, Bess, and the younger human made a line for that, Gotab slowed his pace and sidled along Jaina Solo.

"How are you holding up?" she asked him.

"Better than I thought I would."

"And Venku?"

"The same. He's recovering better than Fi did from a similar injury. But that was a long time ago... Tell me, why does he call you 'Goddess'?"

Jaina sighed yet again. "A long story. Back during the Yuuzhan Vong War, Sharr helped me run, well, I guess you'd call it a psy-ops program. We were trying to convince the Yuuzhan Vong that I was their trickster goddess Yun-Harla."

"And why would the *vongese* believe that?"

"Because Yun-Harla had a twin brother. Twins are very rare among the Yuuzhan Vong. They're considered sacred." She looked like she was going to say more, but snapped her mouth shut.

"I see," Gotab said simply, then changed tack, "Do you really think we can help you? You already have engineering crews from the fleet here."

"I'm mostly interested in what you and Venku can do," she said plainly.

"Because we possess the Force?"

"That's right."

"This is a piece of machinery. An extraordinary one, but still a machine."

"It's part of a living world," Jaina said. "Living things and machinery aren't opposed here. They co-exist in strange ways."

"I'm already aware of that." He sighed. "All right. I will help with the inspection."

"That's all I ask," Jaina said. Then Gotab turned to follow Venku and Jendri toward the entrance to the north shaft, while Jaina headed to the command bunker.

A platform attached to the rim of the massive shaft took them deeper into the planet's engine. There was no cover except a simple metal bar along the edge, and wind whirled around the vane and buffeted the walls of the shaft. It took all of Gotab and Venku's strength just to hold onto the railing. The further down they went the thicker the smooth metal vane itself gradually became. The open space of the shaft grew narrower, and the overcast sky more distant, giving Gotab a feeling of claustrophobia. The idea that these engine shafts could fill with destructive thrust energy at any moment was more than a little disquieting.

The engineering teams already working in the shaft did not seem to care much about the new arrivals. Gotab asked the chief some perfunctory questions about the machinery, and the chief gave distracted answers. Jendri paced the walkways rimming the shaft at regular intervals and observed the crew as they calibrated parts of the machinery. Venku stayed by the lift, staring up at the distant sky, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

Gotab did learn some things about the engines. They were, in many ways, super-sized versions of typical starship engines, but with key differences. They possessed elaborate shock absorbers so as not to tear the planetary crust apart every time they were fired. The power core, three miles deep beneath the planet's surface, was especially well armored. Every system contained layers upon layers of redundancy. Modifications had been made again and again over almost a century, patching together technology from the Old Republic, Galactic Alliance, Ferroans, even some Yuuzhan Vong. It was an engineer's joy and an engineer's nightmare.

Most importantly, the chief said, they only worked when Sekot *wanted* them to work.

And that was what bothered Gotab about this, about Zonama Sekot as a whole. The planet was a living being, with a consciousness that manifested itself within the Force. It was also a planet filled with artificial things, from cities to landing pads to giant hyperdrive engines. Somehow, they were all unified into one system, even if nobody living on said planet knew exactly how that system worked.

Gotab had always been good at compartmentalization. It had made him a good engineer and a good doctor. It had also helped him switch from Jedi Knight to Mandalorian, swapping out one ancient order for another, even though so many of their values and rituals were diametrically opposed. Even when he used the Force, he used it like a tool, to heal or sometimes to harm.

He knew some Jedi spoke like they were in touch with some unifying facet of the cosmos, but he'd only felt that elation once, a very long time ago, and only with the aid of another being vastly more powerful than himself. He'd almost entirely

forgotten the sensation. When he was young, training under Arligan Zey, he'd never come close to that feeling. When Jedi got all mystical, it was usually prelude to some righteous campaign against the evil Dark Side-wielding Sith that ended with billions dead.

He was self-aware enough to know that the *Mandos* had their mystical, clannish side too. On one level, he'd been hypocritical to swap out Jedi for Mandalorian in a fit of moral pique regarded the Republic's treatment of clone soldiers. The Mandalorians could be brutal, especially to outsiders. At the end what had made him turn *Mando* wasn't moral outrage. He needed a place to belong, a clan to call his own, and he hadn't gotten that from Zey and the Jedi. He got that from Kal Skirata's *Mando*-loving clones, so he'd followed their path instead. It was as simple and amoral as that.

As he watched the engineers work, he decided what, above all, fascinated the frightened him about Zonama Sekot. In this living world he found a refutation of the mechanical, compartmentalized life he'd built for himself. It spoke of lofty, mystic things, the kind maybe he could have known, if only he hadn't turned his back on Jedi tradition in a burst of adolescent anger and reduced the Force to a simple tool for performing useful tricks.

He didn't feel sorry for himself. He'd made his choice a long time ago. What he wondered was whether his resentment toward the Jedi, his suspicion of the Force itself, had stolen something from Venku, something that was, from a certain point of view, his birthright.

After an hour or so in the shaft, Gotab felt he had nothing more to do or say, so he took the lift back up. Venku and Jendri stayed behind, watching the Alliance and Ferroan techs work.

The overcast clouds had faded and sun broke through a filmy layer to shine brightly on the surface of the planet. Gotab walked across the landing field to the edge and stared out across the fields. Tall grass rippled and shimmered across the low rolling hills. There were no forests or mountains to break the view, no artificial things of any kind. The bright fields seemed to go on forever beneath a brilliant sky.

"Nice, isn't it?" Jaina Solo said beside him.

Gotab jerked and stared at her. He hadn't heard her sneak up behind him, hadn't been track of time as he watched the grass. He was getting soft in his old age, or possibly senile.

"There's nothing for me down there," he said. "It's interesting. But the techs know what they're doing."

"Maybe," Jaina shrugged. "According to the diagnostics they've been running, the engines still aren't drawing power from the main core. They've checked and double-checked all the equipment, so it *should* work..."

"It only works if the planet wants to," Gotab shook his head. "You've got a machine with a mind of its own."

"Something like that," Jaina said. "Pretty frustrating, huh?"

"This is why I gave up on all that cryptic mystic Jedi *osik* a long time ago," Gotab muttered.

"Meaning what exactly?"

"I'm an engineer. A doctor. A soldier. I like things that are reliable. Predictable."

"The Force isn't like that."

"I know. That's why I don't like to use it."

Jaina looked out at the grass. Wind blew at their backs, sending streamers of hair flying past her face. When it changed directions she tucked strands behind her ears and said, "Ben met his mother today."

Gotab stared for a moment, confused. Then he understood. Ben Skywalker, the Grand Master's son and heir apparent. Ben Skywalker, whose mother had been murdered by Jacen Solo.

"You mean he saw her ghost?"

"That's right," Jaina nodded. "In the forests. Sekot appeared as a small boy and led him to her."

"And... What did she say?"

"I don't know. Ben wouldn't tell. I figure it's between him and Mara."

The idea of life after death was another of those mystic Force things Gotab didn't like to think about. It was complicated and disturbing on many levels, hopeful and sad at once. After Etain died during Order 66, Kal Skirata had asked him whether her spirit might survive in the Force. Gotab, or Bardan as he'd still called himself then, had answered truthfully: yes, he believed part of Etain might survive. He'd been afraid Skirata might be

offended by that, might see life-after-death as another privilege claimed by hated saber-jockeys. But instead *Kal'buir* had looked relieved. Thankful, even.

Gotab still hoped Etain might survive, in some fashion, after death. He knew Venku still craved to speak with her, to feel his mother's presence, though he'd never admit it aloud. A part of Gotab, deep down, hoped that *he* might survive too. Another part of him hated the very thought. His clan, his brothers and sisters and his adopted children and grandchildren, his late wife, they were not Jedi. Only Venku and his children had any Jedi genes. The rest of them would go to join the *Manda'yaim* when they died, but that was just a vague concept of continued *Mando* culture, not true, blue-ghost, life-after-death.

He wanted to see Etain after he died, but also didn't want to exist without all those he'd known and loved. He felt torn, and when he was stuck on a problem with no solution, he normally tried his best to ignore it.

Jaina watched him for a while, and when he didn't say anything, she continued, "Ben says he could talk to Mara because she'd been on Sekot before. Because it had met her, the planet was able to... retrieve her from wherever she was. That's the way I understand it, at least."

Gotab felt a little relieved, and also disappointed. He didn't know what he'd do if he faced Etain's blue ghost. Likely she wouldn't even recognize him. Death had trapped her forever as a young woman, small but brave enough to defy the Jedi Order for love of a man most of the galaxy didn't even consider human, while time had marched on for Bardan Jusik and turned him into a scarred, gray, ugly old man who'd far outlived his time.

Jaina hugged herself, shivered in the cold wind. "I'm worried. I'm afraid I might see... him."

Ah, of course. Wrapped up in grief from a lifetime ago, Gotab hadn't even thought about Jaina, and the brother she had killed.

"You can't know, can you?" Gotab said. "That's the problem with the damned Force. It just... does what it wants."

"Yeah," Jaina choked. "Pretty much."

"Things are usually simpler without it," he said.

Water gleamed in her eyes. Gotab turned his gaze to the grass, still rippling and shining in the wind. Jaina didn't say anything for a long time and neither did he. He felt very powerless here, and very small.

After a while, Jaina asked, "Did you love her? Venku's mother, I mean."

Gotab looked at her, surprised. Of course she'd consider his pain. She was the selfless Jedi, not him.

"I did," he admitted. "Not romantically. I don't think so, anyway. I was a kid, and I wouldn't have understood romantic love even without the Jedi brainwashing. But like a sister, maybe."

"And Venku's father, did you love him?"

"Darman was a brother to me."

"If you met Darman again, what would you say to him?"

"I've never thought about that," Gotab grunted truthfully.

Etain he'd thought about, but Darman... No. That life, its agony and failure and tragic ending, was one of those things he'd compartmentalized. Unlike with Etain, the Force couldn't dangle any taunting lure in front of him. Darman was gone forever, and there was no point in looking back.

Still, he felt he had to ask. "Have you thought about what you'd say your brother?"

"No," Jaina said firmly, forbidding discussion. Gotab knew she was telling the truth.

Even a Jedi learned to compartmentalize, if she had to.

For a moment, as she looked at the Yuuzhan Vong intendant standing before her in her personal daumutek, Magister Danni Quee felt a surge of her old revulsion for his race.

Just quickly as it came, it was gone, but it still startled her. The sudden intrusion of Jaina Solo and Tahiri Veila into her life again, and the awful revelation of Jacen's final fate, had shaken her deeply and brought long-buried emotions to the fore.

But once it was gone, she assessed the being in front of her. Verao Shai was a far cry from the grotesque Praetorite Vong warriors who'd held her captive on Helska 4 all those years ago; her first introduction to their face. He'd been a young solider when the leader of Domain Shai had died in disgrace at

Ithor, and he'd spent most of the ensuing war at the rear lines, far from chances of glory, left to consort with the battered worker caste who made up the bulk of Yuuzhan Vong society. The experience had opened his mind; once the war ended, he'd thrown himself into the recreation of Yuuzhan Vong society on Zonama Sekot and become one of Danni's most trusted adjutants. The self-inflicted scars of his youth were buried now, barely visible beneath his white face-paint.

Verao Shai bent his head forward slightly, inquisitive. "Is something troubling you, Magister?"

"I'm all right," she shook her head. She was sitting on an organic chair-sack, looking up at the intendant as he stood before her in a respectful pose.

She took a breath and said, "I just want to reiterate how important this mission is, and how important it is that we bring back Qelah Kwaad. She might be the only one who can convince the hyperdrives to work."

"Do you think Riina Kwaad will be able to convince her?" He sounded skeptical.

"I can't say for sure," she admitted, "But we have to try."

Verao Shai thought a moment, then asked, "If Qelah Kwaad refuses to come with us, should we take her by force?"

Wordlessly, Danni nodded.

Verao Shai stiffened. "I shall bring some warriors, then."

She shook her head. "We don't want to scare her. You know some Extolled who would be good in a fight, don't you?"

Verao Shai nodded. He'd long ago shed his caste prejudice.

"Good. Take them. I'm sure... Riina Kwaad can also help if you need it."

Verao Shai nodded. "She is small but quite... durable."

When Danni had last seen Tahiri the woman hadn't seemed durable at all. The telling of all Jacen's crimes, had wracked her almost as much as it had Danni, and the sudden appearance of Sekot, as Tahiri's teenage self of all things, seemed to have hurt her in a place she hadn't dared bare to Danni and Harrar. It was why Danni was giving instructions to Verao Shai now instead of the Jedi woman; it was far easier emotionally.

Not for the first time, it made Danni wonder if Sekot had developed a cruel streak.

She forced a smile and said, "Good hunting, Verao Shai."

He snapped his arms in a cross over his chest, wrists to shoulders, and bowed slightly. "We won't fail you, Magister."

She watched him go; to her surprise, that smile lingered on her face. It had been a long, long road from Helska 4 to Zonama Sekot, and when she dwelt on it she found it hard to believe. The first human to encounter the Yuuzhan Vong invasion force and survive was now their leader; such an impossibility was enough to give her hope, and hope was what she needed right now.

Shortly after Verao Shai left, Harrar ducked his head beneath the threshold and stepped into her daumutek, trailing white robes behind him.

The sight of the old priest also gave her hope; it always had. Without Harrar's help she could have never managed to reform Yuuzhan Vong society as much as she had. He'd been particularly helpful in disassembling the hierarchy of fanatic priests who'd clung to the old bloodletting ways under the guidance of former High Priest Jakan.

Danni was not by nature a spiteful person, but when the old bastard had died six years after the war's end, she'd been very glad of it.

"They'll be off soon," she told Harrar as the old priest folded his bony legs beneath him and sat on the chair-sack opposite hers.

"I know," he said, placing his hands on his kneecaps as they jutted out beneath his robes. "I just spoke with Riina Kwaad."

"How is she holding up?" Danni asked.

"She is trying to put her mind on the future." Harrar's small eyes narrowed as he examined her face. "Are you, Danni Queen?"

Danni laughed; a dry, sad, incredulous laugh. She shook her head and said, "How can I?"

"*Can* is not the issue. You must do it, for all our sakes. If these 'True Victory' people find us, then—"

"I know, I know." She blew a little sigh and looked the priest in the eye. "Doesn't it matter to you, though, what happened to Jacen?"

"Of course it matters. But it was a long time ago. We have to

look to our story now, Danni Quee. His is finished.”

“It’s an awful way for a story to end. Jacen was... special. Important.”

“Without him, we would not have liberated my people from the bondage they’d kept themselves in.”

“I know. But it’s more than that, Harrar. Jacen... he had a destiny. Everyone knew it.” She and the priest had had their share of theological discussions over the years; they’d long since reconciled Danni’s belief in the Force guiding beings to Harrar’s idea of the gods controlling fates.

“Perhaps his destiny was to defeat Onimi, and guide our people to Zonama.” Harrar spread his long-fingered hands. “If so, he accomplished what his Force meant for him to do.”

“But what happened *after* that? I still don’t understand how the Jacen we knew, the who had that destiny, saved your people, could become... what Tahiri said he did.”

She looked at her lap and couldn’t bring herself to say any more. From the moment she’d met Jacen on Helska 4, she’d known the boy was special. Over the wars’ five years she’d watched him grow from a troubled boy to a confident, strong man who had a connection with the Force that no other being did, not even Master Skywalker.

A part of her had come to love the man he’d become. She didn’t know exactly when it happened; maybe when they were on the mission to find Zonama Sekot together, but probably before that, when he’d returned from the dead and they’d spent lazy days together on Mon Calamari’s endless oceans. By then, the boy had definitely become a man.

Those memories had given her bittersweet nostalgia, even after Sekot had told her of Jacen’s death. Now that she knew the truth of it all, it was painful just to conjure his image in her head.

“Jedi can be redeemed,” she said. “Darth Vader was. Kyp Durrón, and others. But Jacen... It just seems to *unfair* that after everything Jacen was, he’d die a monster.”

She took a deep breath. Her voice cracked as she said, “But after everything he did... I don’t know how he *could* be redeemed.”

She stared at her lap for along time, at her clenched pale

hands, before Harrar said, "Danni Quee, do you know how many beings I killed?"

Her head snapped up. The old priest was looking at her calmly. He said, "I don't. I sacrificed many thousands from your galaxy to the Gods, because I believed all the blood-thirsty dogma that had been passed down by our people for generations."

"But that's different," Danni said. They'd never out-and-out talked about this before, not in all their years on Zonama together, and she couldn't believe has bringing it up now. "What you did, you were *taught* to do. It was part of the culture, passed down for generations..."

He shook his head. "Culture is no excuse. Otherwise, why try to reform it as we have? Danni Quee, I sacrificed too many to the Gods. I did it out of piety, not malice. I remember once talking theology with a H'Kig priest before sending him off to the immolation pits. When you look at me, Danni Quee, do you see that priest's face, and the faces of all those thousands I killed for Yun-Yammka?"

"You know I don't."

"Why?" His tone was blunt, almost cruel.

It was a simple but biting question. Just allowing the Yuuzhan Vong to retreat to Zonama Sekot had been an act of amnesty. Harrar was hardly the only one on this world who'd killed innocents in the war. The only way for this new society of theirs to function was to look past old crimes and concentrate on the future.

Which was, she supposed, what the old priest was trying to tell her.

"You've earned forgiveness," she sniffed, "Through everything you've done for me. For your people."

"I'm glad to know that." He sounded genuinely relieved.

"But Jacen... Jacen didn't get that chance." Jaina had killed him before that. Dani didn't know if she'd be able to look the woman in the eye the next time they met, knowing what she did now.

"But it is possible," Harrar said, "That given the time, the opportunity, the second chance..."

"There are no second chances. He's *dead*. That's the whole

point.” Her voice shook.

Harrar lowered his eyes. “I am sorry. I did not mean to upset you.”

“Oh, I know.” She got up, knelt down in front of him, and placed her palms on his long bony fingers. “I appreciate *everything* you’ve done for me, Harrar, all this time. I couldn’t have held his planet together without you.”

He met her eyes again. “Then you should be cheered, Danni Quee. Your friends have returned.”

“I know.” She squeezed his hands. “And believe me, I am.”

Yet Jacen’s loss, his corruption and death, had left a hole that not even Jaina and Tahiri’s return could fill. She didn’t know how those women had lived with that awful knowledge for the past four years. Despite all the trials she herself had been through, she found she didn’t envy them at all.

Jagged Fel hated talking to his wife over the holo. It only reminded him of how distant they were, how badly he wanted to feel her touch and warmth.

She was projected in blue light before him now, over the desk of his private office: a head-and-shoulders image three-quarters of life size. She looked strangely distorted now, strangely flattened. For a second he’d thought the holo-projector was acting up, but then he realized it must have been a function of the loss of his eye.

“We’re doing the best we can here,” Jaina was saying, “But I’m not sure what good it will do. The hyperdrive core looks like it *should* operate, but the Ferroans say it never will unless Sekot wants it to.”

Jag tried to hide a scowl. He didn’t like having to rely on weird mystical Force entities when he was trying to plan a military operation.

“Have you had any communication with Sekot since landing?” he asked.

Jaina took a breath and seemed to consider her response.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Jag muttered.

“I just talked to the Magister. Danni said *she* just spoke with Sekot, along with Tahiri and Harrar. The planet didn’t say anything about engaging the hyperdrives, though. It left before

anyone could ask.”

The planet didn’t ‘leave,’ Jagged thought. It was right there outside his viewport.

Trying not to sound peevish, he asked, “Well, what *did* Sekot say?”

“It said... a dragon was coming. And it had to prepare,”

“Well, *that* sounds lovely. And it didn’t say anything about firing the hyperdrives and getting us *away* from this dragon?”

Jaina didn’t seem to notice his sarcasm. “There’s something else,” she said.

He could hear her voice crack, even through the slight blur of the audio transmission. Softening his tone, he asked, “What is it?”

“Ben talked to Sekot too.” Jaina took a breath. “It showed him to his mother.”

Jag stared at the holo-image, unsure of what to say, unsure if he truly understood.

“Ben talked to Mara,” Jaina said. “Sekot summoned her spirit somehow, I don’t know. I think it’s because it *knew* Mara, because she’d spent time on this world before.”

“You said Ben spoke with his mother in the Maw once. Was it like that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never... met anyone who’s... passed. But he said it was like she was right there with him.”

Jag blew out a breath. “And Sekot hasn’t come to you about... any of this?”

“No,” she said. And he could hear in her voice that she hoped it wouldn’t.

“Jaina-” he began, then stopped. There were a thousand things he wanted to say but he didn’t want to say any of them over the disconnect of a distorted transmission.

Jacen Solo was someone she almost never talked about, not even to her husband. He knew the pain of losing siblings too well, and the need to bury memories and emotions to keep them from consuming you, and he knew Jaina’s pain at killing her own brother was unimaginably worse than anything he’d experienced.

He also knew, though he’d never told her, that he’d give anything to speak to Davin, Cherriss, Chak, or Cem again.

Abruptly, Jaina asked, "How's Wynssa?"

"Excuse me?"

"You two have any shooting matches yet?" She was trying to sound glib.

"Ah, no. *Celestial* is holding position. As are we all."

"Well. I'm glad you're up in the sky, watching my back for me, Jag."

He smiled a little. "Watching your back is always a pleasure."

She smiled too, sighed, stretched tired shoulders. "In case you were wondering, those *Mandos* are behaving themselves, but they want to know if you've heard anything from Csilla."

"I've heard nothing from my Wynssa. She has the only direct link to the CEDF. I trust that means no news."

"I thought as much. Just making sure."

"If something... unforeseen happens, do you think they could be a problem?" Jag had bought the Mandalorians away from Daala once; there was no reason someone else couldn't buy them again.

"I don't think so, Jag. These are ones I have under control."

Jag didn't think it was ever possible to really get *Mandos* under control, but he wasn't going to argue the point. "I'll trust you on that."

She nodded. "Thanks. Well, if there's nothing else, I'll get off the line and back to work. See if we can't pull out a miracle somehow."

"If anyone can, I'm sure it's you," he said honestly.

Jaina seemed taken aback by that. She blinked and said, "I'll try not to let you down."

"You won't."

He nodded, attempted a smile, and switched the holo off.

Jagged sighed and sat back in his chair. He decided that once they got out of this alive— *once*, not *if*— he'd taken Jaina on a second honeymoon.

They both bloody well deserved one.

In the end, Tahiri led a party of six to find Qelah Kwaad. Harrar allowed them to take a Sekotan ship from the town, though he warned her not to get too close to Kwaad's supposed

hiding place in the Blue Mountains. That Master Shaper had, unsurprisingly, set traps to ensure her privacy against intruders from the air.

When Tahiri asked if intruders from the ground would fare any better, the old priest had just shrugged.

Unlike the Sekotan vessel she had recovered from the broken True Honor frigate, the mechanical components of this ship had not been removed and replaced with dovin basals and Yuuzhan Vong bio-formed interface masks. Instead they retain sleek metallic consoles, holographic view-screens, and other amenities familiar to pilots all over the galaxy. Tahiri and Scut took the helm, but to her surprise the other Yuuzhan Vong in the party showed no aversion to the mechanical devices.

Two of them were Extolled, and that might have had something to do with it. The former members of the Shamed Ones undercaste had been quicker than the other to eschew the stricter tenants of traditional Yuuzhan Vong theology. She did not know Vlethem or Narith, but apparently the two of them spent much time exploring the Blue Mountain on foot. Both were tall and wiry of build. Narith had been Shamed because his body would not take to implants, leaving his appearance nearly as smooth and natural-looking as Scut's. Vlethem, by contrast, had a hideous, crab-like claw grafted on to one shoulder, the result of a shaping gone wrong. Massive canines protruded from his lower jaw, giving him a fearsome appearance, though his eyes were tired and sad.

Also with the group was the intendant Verao Shai and a female shaper named Kodra Val. Tahiri had worked with both of them in growing new villages in which the new Yuuzhan Vong population would live, and Kodra Val had cooperated with Qelah Kwaad on several projects. She distinctly remembered Kodra Val's disgust at mechanical technology, but that was fifteen years ago, and she seemed to have grown used to it since then. The same seemed true for the Yuuzhan Vong in general.

As they flew through Zonama's lower atmosphere toward the mist-shrouded mountain range, the other Yuuzhan Vong had many questions for Scut. Vlethem asked him what it was like growing up amidst humans, and whether he had faced hatred

from them. Kodra Val asked about the neoglith masquer technology he'd developed while Narith asked whether he followed any of the traditional religion.

Scut wasn't big on the old gods, but Narith had a lot to say. He was a follower of a new god in the pantheon, the Ganner, who was popular with the warriors but also with some Extolled. Vlethem, meanwhile, was a follower of the Prophet Yu'shaa, the great leader who gave hope to the Shamed Ones and, he claimed, had been martyred during the retaking of Yuuzhan'tar.

It was a strange conversation for Tahiri to listen to. When she'd left Zonama Sekot, the cults to both Ganner Rhysode and Yu'shaa had been slowly growing. The Ganner she had known had been a brave Jedi, but also vain and something of a braggart. Still, she knew he had died heroically, fighting bravely against thousands of warriors, using Anakin's lightsaber no less, so she didn't begrudge him his posthumous honor.

The worship of Yu'shaa was more difficult, because Tahiri was one of the few beings on Zonama Sekot who knew that the Prophet who had led the Shames Ones' insurrection against Shimmra was actually Nom Anor, the scheming executor who had murdered Nen Yim and nearly killed Sekot itself. Nom Anor had, in fact, died at the end of the war, but Tahiri had to admit that, for his scheming selfish reasons, he had helped bring down a corrupt and bloodthirsty regime, setting the Yuuzhan Vong on course for redemption. She was uncomfortable with the idea that a man she despised might have left a positive mark on the galaxy.

Scut himself was busy trying to pilot this new ship, and he acted annoyed at the questioning. At the same time, Tahiri knew that a part of him was thrilled with the attention. She did not just see it through his face; she felt it through her Vongsense.

It was strange, operating on two layers of yourself. With one part of her, the part she called Tahiri, the part she'd acted as for the last decade, she could feel the forest-draped mountains beneath her hum with the Force. She could feel the life in this ship too. The other part of her, the Riina who'd lay dormant and

sometimes almost forgotten since leaving Zonama Sekot, she could sense the telepathic energy of these beings.

It was not the Force exactly; she could not pick up Vlethem with her mind like she could the trees or bushes they were passing. She could, however, sense some of their emotions, their energy. Jacen had described her Vongsense (his Vongsense, too) as being like the telepathic powers of a yammosk war coordinator. Tahiri had not liked being compared to a yammosk, and did not particularly like it now, but it was the best comparison she could muster.

"Yes," Vlethem was saying, "But how often do you wear your masquer? All of the time? Some of it?"

"Some of it," Scut said, keeping his eyes on the approaching mountains. "Most of it, I guess."

"When you are in public, walking through the crowd, do you wear your masquer?"

"I do," he admitted.

"Always?"

"Pretty much, yes."

Vlethem shook his ugly head, like he was disappointed. "Do you always feel the need to hide what you are?"

"Not always. My squadmates, my comrades, are used to me like this," Scut said defensively. "And a Yuuzhan Vong is not *all* I am."

"Then are you a hybrid like Riina?" Kodra Val asked, tentacles writhing on her head.

Scut blinked, momentarily confused. Then he realized who 'Riina' was. "No, I'm not like her. I'm not a... hybrid. But my father is human. My comrades are human, Clawdite, Wookiee, Gamorrean..."

"Gamorrean?" Kodra Val hissed. "They are... barely sentient."

"He's not an ordinary Gamorrean, just like I'm not ordinary Yuuzhan Vong," Scut insisted. "In fact-"

"Hush," Tahiri whistled. "We're getting close. Vlethem, Narith, give me some help here."

She slowed her ship's engines and felt the two Extolled lean in over her shoulder. Narith stuck a smooth gray hand out and pointed to the largest mountain in view.

"That one?" she asked.

"No," Narith said. "Do you see the smaller peak, rising from its southern foothill?"

"I see it. Is that hers?"

Narith nodded. "She likely has traps for those who come by air. You shall have to land in the valley to the south and walk."

"*We're* walking," Tahiri said. "All six of us, remember? You're here to show us those traps."

Narith nodded. "As you, say, Riina Kwaad."

Tahiri didn't object to that name. Here, surrounded by Yuuzhan Vong, it was as good a name as any.

She set the shuttle down in the valley. It took them fifteen minutes to pack their things and begin the long walk up the mountain. Tahiri and Scut were dressed in patterned camouflage jumpsuits, and carried heavy packs on their backs, but the other Yuuzhan Vong wore only animal-hide tunics and carried no cargo. An amphistaff unwound from Kodra Val's arm and turned into a walking stick; another appeared in Verao Shai's hand. Vlethem bent forward and used his deformed, claw-like hand to help him with the ascent.

Then didn't talk much on the way up. The vegetation of the slope was a mix of boras, waist-high scrub, and blades of high grass. The ground was left damp by the blue-tinted mist that gave the mountains their name, and Tahiri had to step carefully to keep from slipping. The air, at least, was cool, so she did not sweat through her jumpsuit like she was afraid of. Sekot, as a whole, felt significantly cooler than she remembered. Danni had explained that, after the emergency jump, Sekot's normally hot, humid atmosphere had become drier and chillier. It had damaged the growth of the younger boras, and affected some of the natural fauna in the forests, but thankfully had not destroyed the ecosystem entirely.

Maybe that was something Qelah Kwaad could help with. Maybe Sekot itself would get around to fixing things, once it stopped... communing with the dead, or whatever its deal was.

She was used to the living world being cryptic and shy; in her five years living on the planet she'd only spoken to it less than a dozen times, during most of which it had been wearing Nen Yim's face. Those visions had always been Force projections; whatever Sekot was doing now seemed to be assembling atoms

and molecules with the Force and making visible to Force-users and Yuuzhan Vong alike, and the possibilities in *that* were both terrifying and fascinating.

But Sekot was Sekot, and there was nothing she could do about it. She just wanted to get to Qelah Kwaad and see if she could bring the reclusive shaper off her mountain.

After about an hour's walk uphill, Nairth stopped the march and insisted they take a detour. He did not explain his reasons, but Tahiri saw no point in distrusting him. They circled around the waist of the mountain for another half hour, then began their ascent against.

As they climbed higher up the mountain, the mist grew thinner. She could see further up tangled forest that rode the slope. The air grew chiller, though the physical effort of climbing the mountain was enough to keep her warm.

After another half hour of climbing the mountain, Vlethem ordered them to halt.

"Do we have to go around again?" asked Scut.

Vlethem shook his fanged face. "No. But I sense... *something* coming..."

As if on cue, they heard something snapping through the forest ahead. Tahiri put a hand on her lightsaber but did not ignite, not yet. Whatever it was grew closer. The sounds of tumbling brush were replaced by the cracking of branches and the creaking of tree trunks.

She flipped her lightsaber on just in time to see a dark lanky shape appear in the branches overhead. A black, furry animal hung between two trees, with four vice-like clawed feet and a prehensile tail clinging to different branches. The creature stared at them but did not attack.

"What is it?" Scut whispered.

"One of *her* scouts," Kodra Val said. "Like on the *ol'kyath* from Yuuzhan'tar but... different."

Tahiri reached out with her Vongsense to touch the creature's mind. She felt predatory hunger, yes, but also curiosity, and dim flickerings of sentience. This was not a stupid beast, hungry to tear flesh from their bones.

She tried to broadcast feelings into its mind. She projected calm, trust. The creature blinked its big eyes, then turned around

and scampered from branch to branch, back up to the place from which it came.

“What did you do?” Scut asked her.

“I told it to play nice,” Tahiri said.

“The Force?” Kodra Val shook her head. “Impossible.”

“Not the Force. I was able to... touch its mind.”

“Fascinating,” Vlethem said. “Can you also-”

“Enough talk,” Verao Shai said sternly. “We don't have a lot of time before sunset. Let's get going.”

“Agreed,” said Tahiri and they resumed their climb.

The received no more animal guests the rest of the trip. The scouts detected no more traps. They simply kept climbing until they found it: one lonely dome-shaped daumutek, located in a small clearing jutting out of the slope. Through the trees, Tahiri could see the ridges and peaks of the other mountains in the range, half-dissolved in blue mist.

“Come out, Qelah Kwaad!” she shouted in Yuuzhan Vong. “It is I, Riina Kwaad! Answer one of your own domain, Master Shaper!”

She waited, but nothing emerged from the daumutek. She plucked the lightsaber off her belt and moved forward cautiously. Verao Shai's and Narith's amphistaffs snapped to combat-ready mode, their snakelike mouths facing forward, and followed Tahiri's lead while the others spread out to the clearing's edge.

Tahiri reached out with her Vongsense, trying to locate a sentient being within the daumutek. She found nothing. She held her breath as she went through the threshold.

The inside of the daumutek was clearly being used. Fruit dangled from vines stretched beneath the ceiling. Shelves were full of shapers' qahsas and other tools. A murky stew cooled at the bottom of a pot suspended over burnt twigs.

“Riina Kwaad!” Kodra Val shouted from outside. Tahiri ignited her lightsaber and dashed out of the daumutek, Verao Shai and Narith right behind her, Vlethem, Scut, and Kodra Val stood in a loose semicircle around the hunched, cloaked figure at the edge of the clearing.

“Qelah Kwaad,” Tahiri called, still in Yuuzhan Vong. “It's you, isn't it?”

The figure reached up. Gnarled hands with long, bony fingers pulled back the cloak's hood, revealing thin face, unscarred but etched with many inky-black tattoos, topped by a shaper's headdress of wilted tentacles. Age and isolation had not been kind of Qelah Kwaad; indeed, she now bore a startling resemblance to her domain sister, Meezhan Kwaad. Tahiri fought down a spike of revulsion and took two steps closer, holding her lightsaber in front of her.

Qelah Kwaad blinked red-gold eyes and said, "What do you want, heretic-spawn?"

"Don't you want to know how I got here?" Tahiri asked "I haven't seen you in over a decade. Zonama Sekot was lost among the stars, cut off from the Jedi and the Alliance. Yet here I am and you're not the least surprised."

"I am surprised, but so what?" Qelah Kwaad shrugged. "I am an old woman, Riina. I want no part of your wars. Vilath Dal came to me, seeking my aid in some mad quest of his. I told him the same thing I tell you now: Leave me alone."

Danni had assuring Tahiri that Vilath Dal had been tracked, and that he *hadn't* spoken to Qelah Kwaad, but somehow Tahiri trusted the twisted shaper more. She and Vilath Dal both probably had bags of tricks shoulder-deep.

"Master Kwaad," Kodra Val spoke up, "Your people need you. Will you not serve them?"

Qelah Kwaad snorted. "That is what Vilath said too."

Scut, who had been looking back and forth confused while the others spoke Yuuzhan Vong, called to Tahiri. "Tell her the enemy is coming! Tell her they have Alpha Red!"

The other Yuuzhan Vong knew Basic, but none of them knew what Alpha Red was except for Qelah Kwaad herself. The scientist glanced at Scut for the first time and took in his Alliance jumpsuit and scarless face.

"What are you?" she said in halting Basic. It must have been years since she had attempted that tongue.

"My name is Viull Gorsat, but you can call me Scut," he said with dignity.

"You cannot speak our tongue," Qelah Kwaad snapped. "You are not from Zonama Sekot."

"I was raised by humans. I'm a member of Galactic Alliance Intelligence."

"Incredible!" Qelah Kwaad spat. Tahiri couldn't tell if she was shocked, disgusted, or intrigued.

"I don't speak our language well," Scut said, "But I know about our people."

"They're not *your* people, infidel! You are a human in a Yuuzhan Vong masquer!"

Scut shook his head. "No, but I've been a Yuuzhan Vong in human masquer plenty of times. It helps to blend in, given the work I do."

She eyed him suspiciously, but Tahiri could sense the scientist's curiosity whirring inside her. Qelah Kwaad said, "Where did you acquire a masquer?"

"I *bred* it," Scut said proudly. "I didn't have any Yuuzhan Vong life to breed, but I developed it using other alien life. It operates just like a masquer, but without the pain required to take it on and off."

"Pathetic," Qelah Kwaad said "You are soft as a human at heart."

"I am what I am," Scut shrugged. "A little human, a little Yuuzhan Vong. But mostly I'm a shaper."

Oh, Tahiri thought, he was playing his cards well.

"You are not a shaper!" Qelah Kwaad's head wagged from one direction to another. "I am a shaper. *She*, Kodra Val, is a shaper. You are... a *human*, playing with toys!"

"I came to learn from the best," Scut said.

Qelah Kwaad's jaw dropped open. It worked up and down but wouldn't close. Finally, she said, "You are a strange creature."

"Probably," Scut said. "How about a deal? I tell you about all my experiments, and you help us with what we want."

"You think your knowledge can add to mine in any way?"

"I've been working in a completely different environment than you. It's likely I've learned some things you haven't. In the end, there's only one way to find out."

Scowling, Qelah Kwaad looked to Tahiri. "Why did you come here, heretic-spawn? What is it you want from me?"

"We want you to help repair Sekot's hyperdrive engines. We have technicians working on them now, but the organic aspect is beyond them."

"There are other shapers." Qelah Kwaad glanced at Kodra Val. "Have you not examined it already?"

"I have, Master." Kodra Val said. "But my knowledge is small. Yours is far greater."

Qelah Kwaad wagged her head back and forth again. "You flatter me, you all do. You peck at me like birds. You pry at me, you..."

"I'm offering you all I know," Scut pressed. "Don't you want to learn something *new*, after all this time?"

Yes, he knew exactly what cards to play.

Qelah Kwaad's wandering gaze fixed on Scut. Reluctantly, she nodded. "Very well. Tell me everything you know, Viull Gorsat."

"Fine," Scut said. "Just come with us back to the ship."

"No." Qelah Kwaad stamped her feet on the ground. "Tell me what you can, and I will judge the reward you deserve."

Tahiri sighed loudly. "Master Shaper, we do not have the time to--"

"Don't dare instruct me, heretic-spawn!" Qelah Kwaad shouted. "You are nothing but Mezhan Kwaad's mistake! Don't pretend you are anything else."

"It's all right," Scut said. "Let's sit down and talk."

Tahiri shot him a glance. "Are you sure about this?"

"No," he said, "But it's the best chance we have of getting what we came for, isn't it? Besides... I would like to pick her mind about a number of things."

He looked at the old shaper and favored her with a smile. Qelah Kwaad flinched, but did not rebuke him. She gestured to the daumutek. "Come. Let us sit and talk. If you wish, you can prepare food for the night."

Over the next few hours, the sun went down over the misty Blue Mountains and the temperature dropped. The silver gleam of Zonama Sekot's planet filled the sky, forestalling true night. Qelah Kwaad, Scut, and Kodra Val sat inside the daumutek for hours, talking shaper talk that Tahiri could only vaguely understand.

Beneath the silver planet-light, Tahiri opened up her and Scut's backpacks and began taking out the bedrolls. They had only brought one each, but the other Yuuzhan Vong seemed unphased by the prospect of sleeping on the grass in a cold mountaintop, far away from anything that passed for civilization. Narith and Vlethem simply sat down on the grass and hunched their bodies in on themselves. Verao Shai seemed more affected by the night's chill than the Extolled, and he pulled his short cloak tight around his body.

"They will talk in here forever," he muttered.

"Let them talk," Tahiri said in Yuuzhan Vong.

"We should have taken her back down the mountain. By force if we had to."

"That wouldn't have secured her cooperation, would it?"

The intendant shook his head. "She is stringing him along. Picking at him for information. She will not give us anything in return."

"I'm not so sure of that," Tahiri said. With her Vongsense, she could feel genuine excitement from all three parties inside the daumutek. After years in the wilderness, Qelah Kwaad was bitter, broken down, and probably half-mad, but she still had a scientist's mind. Tahiri suspected that, deep down, she *wanted* to help salvage the hyperdrives. She just needed a reason to come off her mountain.

A few hours after sundown, when the planet formed a broad silver bow in the southern sky, Scut came out of the daumutek. Narith and Vlethem were both hunched in the grass, apparently sleeping, while Tahiri had allowed Verao Shai to use her bedroll while she kept watch.

Scut stepped out onto the grass and stared at the half-night sky. Breath escaped from his open mouth in puffs of vapor. Tahiri sidled beside him and said, "Anything good happen so far?"

"I think so," he said. "We've talked a little about my neolith masquers. And about the hyperdrive too. Mostly we've talked about other things. She explained all eight cortices of Shaper knowledge, in far more detail than any of the resources in the Alliance give. And about the creatures she's been breeding, like the one we saw in the forest."

"Okay," Tahiri said. She didn't need Vongsense to tell how excited Scut was, but he needed to stay on track. "Do you think she'll be ready to come down with us at dawn?"

"I think," he said confidently. "She's still irascible. Likely to bite our heads off if we press too hard, and I don't mean figuratively. But still, we've got her excited. She hasn't talked about shaping with anyone in years."

"Good." Tahiri crossed her arms over her chest. "Because getting her off this mountain is what we came for. Everything else is secondary, do you understand? That includes your scientific curiosity."

"Of course," Scut nodded. "Still, once this is all over... I think I need to spend more time on this world."

"Yeah," Tahiri said softly. "Me too."

He turned to look at her. "You? I thought you'd have... Jedi duties."

"I'm not *exactly* a Jedi," she admitted.

"Then what *are* you?"

That was the billion-credit question, the one she'd been fumbling with half her life. Jedi, Sith, Yuuzhan Vong, bounty hunter, Tusken, Tahiri, Riina. All of those names and titles seemed like ephemeral labels slapped on to her, whatever ever-shifting thing she was.

Kind of like Jacen Solo, she thought with a shudder.

"It doesn't matter what I am," she said softly, staring at the silver gas giant's faded arc. "What matters is where I am, what I'm doing, who I'm doing it with. And I think I'd like to spend more time on Zonama Sekot."

"Okay," said Scut. "So once we fix the hyperdrives, defeat Daala, get rid of Alpha Red, and save the Alliance from the True Honor fleet, we can take time off and commune with nature. Sounds like a plan."

Tahiri sighed. "Are you always this upbeat?"

"It's important to be realistic," he said more seriously. "It's how we stay alive."

To that, Tahiri had to agree.

Jagged Fel sat behind the desk of his ready room, looking at the report on the communications array. Syal Antilles, seated

across from him, had just given him a verbal rundown of the findings, but he skimmed through the technical details anyway. He was not an expert in communications technology, but he always wanted to be thorough.

“Working at our current pace, I'm hoping to have the long-range transceiver back online within seven hours,” Syal was saying. “All the other battle damage has been repaired, so we’re essentially back to full fighting status.”

Jagged frowned. “Why did we have to go EV to find damage on the comm? Shouldn't our on-board diagnostics have picked up this error?”

Syal shook her head. “There's a good chance there's an error in the communications firmware. When the transceiver was damaged, the console thought it kicked to backup systems, but that transceiver doesn't *have* backup systems.”

“So the computer was, what? Running subroutines through systems that didn't exist?”

“Something like that, sir.”

Jagged groaned and placed the datapad on his desk. “Well, that is lovely. Reminds me why I never wanted to be a slicer.”

Syal nodded. “Piloting was my forte too, sir.”

Jag regarded her. “And look at us now, Captain. Piloting our desks.”

“My father said he had to be dragged behind one of these kicking and screaming. I'm thinking maybe I should have kicked and screamed too.”

“You're young to be commanding a ship,” Jag commented. He hoped it sounded like a compliment.

“Garik Loran thought I was best for the mission,” Syal said.

“I trust Loran's judgment. He's a smart man.” Jag scratched his beard. “Did you want it though? Or would you have preferred to be flying a fighter wing?”

“To be honest, sir. I was getting sick of flying. I wanted a change of pace.”

“And now you want back in the cockpit.”

“I suppose so, sir.”

Jag smiled. “I know exactly how you feel, Captain. And for what it's worth, my father was a front-line man too. He always wanted to be leading the charge, giving example to his troops.”

Syal nodded but didn't say anything. Jag was annoyed and couldn't quite say why. He wanted something from Syal, something besides the commander-subordinate routine, but what? She was his cousin, yes, but what did that mean to a man whose own sister was a stranger?

"He speaks very highly of your father," Jag ventured. "I know they only served together for a short time, but he always told me Wedge Antilles was a fine pilot and a fine man. I was glad to find out both were true."

"Thank you," Syal said. Her smile was honest, and grateful, but she didn't volunteer any information. Maybe Wedge Antilles had never told his daughters about Baron Soontir Fel. Maybe he had, and it wasn't very good. His father was not the friendliest man in the galaxy,

Then, a little awkwardly, she asked, "Is my aunt well?"

Of course, the *other* Syal Antilles. The original. "I believe so, yes. So Wynssa has told me. I have... not actually seen my parents in almost ten years."

Deep sadness showed in Syal's eyes, but she nodded dutifully. "I see, sir."

No, they weren't going to get past *sir* today. Jag was disappointed, but not surprised. He didn't know what to make of his cousin and she didn't know what to make of him. Instead they both fell back on military formality that ran in their blood.

Then he thought of Myri. Clearly it was thicker in some blood than others.

"How is your sister?" Jag asked.

Syal blinked. "You just saw her. I think she's catching rack time now."

"I can't image what that must have felt like, your sister coming back from the dead..." Jag settled back in his chair, feeling heavy. He would give anything to Davin, Chak, Cem, or Cheriss again.

Syal posture relaxed too. "Words can't describe, sir," she said with an open smile. "I'm hoping we can get the comm system fixed soon, so I can let our parents know. And... how is *your* sister, Commander?"

Jag slumped a little more in his chair. "Well, I suppose. I hope. I have some trouble understanding what she's thinking."

"I know the feeling," said Syal. "But she came back to the nebula to save you. I'd think that says a lot."

Maybe she'd come back for him, maybe she'd gotten direct orders from Csilla, Jag had no idea. He wanted to believe the former, of course, but when he tried to take himself back twenty years, reenter the mind of a dogmatic Chiss soldier who'd never met Jaina Solo, he could not be sure. His father had once told him that sometimes in life a man must choose between love and duty. Jag had chosen love, but Wyn? It seemed like all the love had been burned out of her, leaving only duty.

"Exile does strange things," he muttered. "It doesn't just separate you from the people you care about, it separates them from each other. You leave a big gap in people's lives, gaps you don't even think about most of the time, but they *are* there. And then..." He shook his head. "The sister I remember from before my exile and the one I'm working with now might as well be totally different beings, and I can't help but wonder whether *I'm* at fault somehow..."

Syal cleared her throat. "Sir... have you tried saying any of this to *her*?"

Jag blinked, sat upright, jerked out of his reverie. "No, Captain. I suppose I haven't."

"Well, she's your *sister*, sir. She should be willing to hear you out, at least."

"Perhaps," Jag admitted. "I think that-"

Suddenly a voice squawked over the room's comm system. "Commander Fel, this is the bridge! Commander Fel!"

"Report!" Jag and Syal barked in unison.

"Um, Commander, Captain. A ship had just dropped into our interdiction field and is heading this way. A Yuuzhan Vong ship."

Both of them jumped out of their seats. Jag said, "Put the fleet on red alert. We're on our way."

Jag was out in the hallway a second later, his cousin right behind him.

Chapter 10

The last time Myri Antilles had been rocked out of bed by an alarm and scrambled to her fighter, it hadn't ended well. This time she had her sister and a whole fleet at her back, so maybe it would go better this time.

Maybe.

She was mildly comforted by the fact that the Wraiths were not taking the lead on this expedition. *Starless* scrambled two full fighter squads in addition to the half-dozen pilots in their StealthX fighters, including Spade Squadron in A-wing interceptors and Dagger Squadron in E-wings. The Spades jetted ahead of the other fighters, but even they lagged behind Knave Squadron's E-wings and a squadron of TIE interceptors from *Vindicator*. The Imperial ships and the carrier *Corusca Gem* were closer to the approaching ship and launched their craft first.

Myri flicked her comlink to an open channel and picked up the broadband transmissions from Knave Leader.

"Yuuzhan Vong ship, please identify yourselves. I repeat, if you can hear, please give some indication."

"Karking good that'll do," Trey's voice rattled in her ear.

"Open comm, Smiles," Voort reminded him.

Trey shut up and let them listen. Knave Leader repeated his request for identification for about a minute before a now voice cracked over Myri's headset.

"We are *Heart of Flame*, seeking assistance," said a voice in guttural Basic.

"Where did you come from, *Flame*?"

"We come from True Honor. We have fled them. You see, our ship is damaged."

"Slow your approach, *Heart*."

"Please, we request to land on Zonama."

"*Heart*, slow your approach and prepare to dock with one of our vessels."

"No!" the voice snapped. "Not with infidel. We will only land on Zonama!"

"*Heart*, I repeat, slow down or we will open fire."

"Knave Leader," Jagged Fel's voice filled Myri's ears, "Fire a shot over their bow."

"Copy, *Starless*. Firing warning shot."

In the far distance, past the glow of Spade Squadron's burning engines, Myri saw the flash of a few lasers.

"*Starless*, she is not slowing."

After a short pause, Fel said, "Aim for her engines. All squads, red alert."

Myri saw a few more red darts up ahead as Knave Squadron's E-wings did their runs on the ship. As far as Myri's eyes and sensors could tell, the ship wasn't firing back. The Knaves did one pass, then spun around for another while the A-wings and TIEs got closer to intercept range.

Then there was a bright flash of light.

"Report!" Fel barked.

"*Starless*, this is Knave Lead. It just blew... Wait! Wait, there's more ships!"

Myri's scanners blinked, recalibrated, and suddenly reported four ships charging toward the planet. Three Yuuzhan Vong, the other... undetermined.

"All ships attack!" Fel said. "Keep them from reaching the planet!"

"You heard him," Voort said. "Wraiths, full speed ahead."

Myri clicked confirmation and maximized speed. The four new ships were charging fast ahead, trailing *Heart's* debris in their wake. These ones were coming in hot, firing madly, taking two of Spade Squadron's A-wings in their initial volley.

As they got closer, Myri got a better look at all four of them. Three were the lumpy rock-like ships she expected of the Yuuzhan Vong, but the fourth was something else entirely. It looked like a giant eyeball, connected by pylons branching off either side that in turn fanned out to webbing-like sails. It was utterly bizarre and unlike anything she had ever seen before.

A full flight of Dagger Squad burst into flame, refocusing Myri's attention. The ships were almost upon them and they were not slowing down.

"Wraiths, pull in tight on me," Voort commander. "We're going after the lead shuttle."

Myri weaved her ship closer to Voort's, dropping it to his lower aft next to Trey's fighter. All six StealthX fighters pointed their matte-black noses at the lead shuttle and charged.

"Torps, double-fire, on my mark," said Voort.

Myri dropped her sights on the shuttle. Finally, it seemed to notice them, and belched flame-like projectiles from its forward cannon.

"Mark!"

Myri double-tapped her trigger, sending a pair of torps speeding through space. The other Wraiths fired too, and pulled up in perfect formation. Explosions seemed to blossom all at once: There was a flash of fire and light right next to Myri, buffeting her craft, while up ahead, their torpedoes slammed into the shuttle's forward dovin basals, overwhelming them, cracking its yorik coral hull and spilling its guts out into space. Even as debris and bodies were flushed out into the vacuum the shuttle plunged toward Zonama Sekot.

"Where's Smiles?" Wran squawked. "I can't see Smiles!"

"Fierfek!" Thaymes snapped. "I don't have him either!"

"He was on my wing!" Myri said, mouth suddenly dry. She checked her scanner: Four StealthX, plus hers. No Trey.

"Did he go EV?" Voort asked, voice strangely calm.

"I got no signal," Thaymes said,

"That doesn't mean he's gone," Myri insisted.

"Alert! Alert!" a new voice screamed over her headset. "New ships, entering the system!"

Myri wheeled her ship away from the planet and checked her scanners. On the edge of the gravity well, ships were popping in one after another and approaching at best sublight speed.

Imperial-class Star Destroyer. *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer. Three Marauder corvettes, two Lancer frigates, two Bothan Assault Cruisers, two Mon Cal ships, another Impstar...

"Oh," Myri rasped. "Oh sithspawn."

As they wheeled to face the coming onslaught, their old quarry charged onward to Zonama Sekot.

As Fy'lyor stood on *Chimaera's* bridge, watching the battle unfold, she couldn't help but feel like her entire life had been leading to this moment. Her childish dreams of fighting for the Empire, her hard labors at the Academy, her early service, the assignment to Trinity, *Justifier's* blazing destruction, and her hard choice in Daala's holding cell... All of it had led her here.

While Daala hovered close to the tactical holo, commanding the larger fleet movements. Fy'lyor stayed in the crew pit near the navigation station.

"Lieutenant," she told the chief helmsman, "Take us closer to the Chiss vessel. Prepare a firing solution."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Contact the main flight bay. Tell them to launch squadrons one, three, four, and five. Keep the others on standby."

"Yes, ma'am."

Fy'lyor held her breath as he relayed her orders without hesitation. She still could not believe she was here, commanding this legendary ship, giving orders and watching them be obeyed without hesitation.

The deck rocked, tipping her against the back of the helmsman's chair and dispelling her disbelief. This was not a dream come true, this was a deadly combat zone, and she had to get used to it.

"Damage team, report," she said.

"Negative. Just fire on our port shields."

"Source?"

"Chiss Clawcraft from *Celestial*. Three squads."

"Have squads four and five screen them. Call *New Order* for assistance."

"Yes, ma'am."

Fy'lyor moved down to the end of the crew pit, clambered up the ladder, and stepped on to the main deck near the tactical station.

"Good," Daala said when she saw her. "Don't be afraid to let your crew know you're willing to get in the pit with them."

"Thank you," she nodded. "What's the status?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong ships have broken their fighter screen and are heading for the planet," Daala said. "But they don't matter. We can take care of them once we kill the enemy fleet."

Fy'lyor scanned the tactical holo. Trinity had already lost several ships in previous engagements, and what she had left was formidable, but not as impressive as the combined renegade fleets. As she watched, the markers representing *Phoenix*, *Fey'lya*, and *Dey'rylan* were vectoring for Jagged Fel's flagship. Captain Pavric's carrier *Corusca Gem* was spilling out an entire wing of fighters, but its actual batteries were no match for those of *Niathal* and *Lacenta* closing in. Captain Omphlem's *Andromeda* was being protected by Captain Tharen's *Liberty Star*, but one star destroyer would not be enough to protect the Mon Cal interdicator from *Revolutionary*, *Sunbeam*, and two additional Corellian gunships.

Closer to *Chimaera*, Captain Vernedet's *Vindicator* and its flanking anti-starfighter frigates were tangling with the star destroyer *Resolve* and Daala's three *Marauder*-class corvettes. Vernedet, an old human man, had shown no qualms with taking orders from a young Twi'lek woman, and Fy'lyor felt sad to think that he may soon be killed. She felt sad thinking of Jag Fel and the others too; she bore no ill will to the crew of Trinity Fleet.

"You can't hesitate," Daala said, as if sensing her thoughts.

"These are people," Fy'lyor said, "Not Yuuzhan Vong."

"They are protecting the Vong and that makes them the enemy," Daala said firmly. "Jagged Fel is a good man, but his misplaced idealism threatens the entire galaxy."

The bridge shook as a turbolaser volley from *Celestial* scattered over their forward shields. *Chimaera* returned its own fire, and the battle was on.

"We have to offer him the chance to surrender," she told Daala.

"We will," the old woman nodded. "But he won't take it. He's too honorable."

"I know," Fy'lyor said gravely.

Something flashed on the tactical holo. The Trinity frigate *Nova Burn* crumpled under fire from *Resolve* and exploded.

She could see its dying flare distantly through the forward viewport.

Fy'lyor's mouth went dry. Captain Orvaal. Nearly two hundred good men and women, humans and aliens, all of whom had trusted her just a few days ago.

Chimaera shuddered under another volley from *Celestial*. Daala laid a firm hand on her shoulder and said, "This is the way it has to be, Captain."

Fy'lyor nodded and blinked a little moisture from her eye. "Admiral, I think... I think we should recall *Resolve*."

Daala glanced at the holo, where the star destroyer was now exchanging direct fire with Captain Vernedet's ship in an equally-matched brawl.

"*Celestial* is giving us a heavy slugging, Admiral. If we combine our fire, and our starfighter screens, we should be able to take it out. Wynssa Fel is a more important target than Vernedet."

Daala considered for a moment, then said, "I'll give the order."

Fy'lyor felt breath escape her lungs as *Resolve* left *Vindicator* to fend off the buzzing Marauders and made a line for *Chimaera* and *Celestial*. She was going to fight and kill people she'd worked with, she accepted that, but she didn't want to kill any more Imperials, especially good men like Vernedet.

As for Jagged Fel's sister, well, they had never seemed close anyway.

She glanced at the tactical holo. Another light winked out. In the far distance, *Liberty Star* smoldered, burned, and died.

Fy'lyor was sure there'd be more of that to come.

Jagged's heart jumped in his throat as Captain Tharen's holo-image suddenly winked out. He turned away from the communications station, stalked past *Starless*'s main tactical holo, and watched it with his own eyes.

Revolutionary was an old *Victory*-class destroyer, and *Sunbeam* was just a *Majestic*-class cruiser, but together they had managed to overwhelm the larger *Liberty Star*. *Revolutionary* poured a volley of turbolaser fire that collapsed her shields while K-wing bombers from *Sunbeam* lobbed torpedoes

right into her bridge. The entire command tower was disintegrated, trailing smoke and debris as the rest of *Liberty Star* began to drift in space. *Andromeda* waited helplessly while *Sunbeam*, *Revolutionary*, and the two gunships circled it like hungry vultures. Jag wanted to do something, anything to save Captain Omphlem, but he had no ships to spare. There was nothing to do except watch him die.

"Commander," Traest Kre'fey called from the tactical station, "*Resolve* has broken away from *Vindicator*. She's heading for *Celestial*."

Suddenly it all vanished from his awareness: the clamor on the bridge, the three capital ships looming toward him, the firefights scattered around Zonama Sekot's orbit, the Yuuzhan Vong ships on the ground, the men and women dying by the hundreds. Everything was reduced to Wynssa Fel.

Jag hurried back to the communications station. "Get me a channel to Commodore Fel! Now!"

"Yes, commander," the lieutenant said.

Thirty seconds felt like forever until his sister's blurry blue holo-image appeared where, just a minute ago, the late Captain Tharen had been.

"Commodore, there's another star destroyer heading your way," he said. "You have to disengage from *Chimaera* and get out of there. Now."

"We've seen it and are taking appropriate measures," Wyn said. Her voice was controlled but her image was rent by bursts of static. Every time it disappeared Jag's heart stopped beating, afraid that what had just happened to Captain Tharen would happen to his sister.

"Commodore," he insisted, "Pull back and help defend *Gem*. That's an order."

Wynssa's image blurred, and static crackled over her words. When she came back she said, "-room for maneuverability. If we try to flee we'll expose our aft."

"Just do it!" Jagged shouted so loud the whole bridge could hear. "Fall back! Fall back now!"

"Will comply," Wyn said curtly. "*Celestial* out."

Jag stalked back to the tactical holo, hoping to get a better view of his sister's retreat. When he saw it a sense of dread

took hold of his body. *Resolve* was already within firing range, heaping laser on *Celestial's* flank while *Chimaera* continued to pound its front. The Chiss vessel was tough, but it was no match for two *Imperial*-class star destroyers.

Wynssa didn't have a chance.

Jag stared at the holo, frozen in a state of helplessness. He could only think: It wasn't fair. He'd lost Davin and Cheriss when he was a child, Cem and Chak when he was an adult, and each time their deaths had been relayed by a holo-message, or the impersonal declaration of some Chiss officer. Now Wyn, his last sibling, was about to be killed before his very eyes and there was nothing he could do.

He went back to the front viewport, maneuvering dazed through the scrambling bridge crew. He squinted at the fire in the distance, desperate to see it with his own eyes. Two star destroyers were pouring blazing green plasma at one battered target. He saw the first spikes of flame as they tore through the shields and began ripping up the ship, exposing its guts to vacuum, burning away its oxygen and twisting its super-heated durasteel hull to mangled wreckage.

"Commander," a voice said softly behind him, "*Celestial's* engines are down. So are her shields."

Jag looked over his shoulder to see Syal Antilles. Her face was dark with bitter understanding.

"Thank you, Captain," he rasped. He couldn't manage any more.

Commander," Kre'fey called from the tactical station, "*Chimaera* is sending boarding parties. *Celestial* is starting to fire escape pods and deploy shuttles, but the Imps still have a strong fighter screen going. They won't get far."

Wyn would never abandon ship. He knew that. Still, he lurched back to the communication station. He had the tiniest, flimsiest spark of hope, and he had to follow where it led, no matter how painful.

After an excruciating minute, the comm officer was able to get a signal to *Celestial*. His sister stood on the before him one last time, image torn by static.

"Wyn," he said, "You have to get out, get out now. Daala's sending boarding parties. She probably wants to raid the ship."

"We know," Wynssa said coolly. "We're securing all... special cargo now."

Alpha Red. He hadn't even thought about it since the battle started. He shook his head and said, "Wyn, you have to get out of there. Daala will capture you. *Believe* me, you don't want that."

"I will never be taken alive," Wynssa said firmly. "I've just activated the self-destruction systems within this ship."

Of course. Jag had been away from the Chiss so long that he'd forgotten. All major warships were built with self-destruct systems to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. It was the sort of thing to expect from the Chiss, secretive and ruthless.

Suddenly Syal Antilles appeared behind him. She said over his shoulder, "Commodore Fel, the knowledge you have is just as valuable as the special cargo. If the mission is to continue, we *need* you."

"There is no mission left," Wynssa said bitterly.

Jag knew he couldn't argue. Trinity was crumbling under the sustained onslaught of the combined renegade fleets. Unless Zonama Sekot managed to perform one of its miracles, they would be forced to either surrender or die within the next hour.

"Commodore," Syal pressed, "Staying on that ship is the same as death."

Wynssa looked frustrated. "It is the captain's duty to see to the well-being of *every* being on her ship. I must oversee the evacuation. I cannot abandon my crew, *Captain*."

"Then slag your duty. What about your brother?"

"Captain Antilles, *please*," Jag said. He felt something wet in his eye. He blinked it away, faced Wynssa's blurring image, and said, "Don't do it for me, Wyn. Think of father. Think of *mother*. She doesn't deserve to lose her last child."

"I am not her last child," said Wyn.

"They lost me a long time ago," Jag shook his head. "Please, Wyn."

Static overcame the image, and for a horrible drawn-out moment he thought she might be gone forever. Then she appeared again. Through the blurry holo it was hard to tell, but she almost looked contrite.

“Even if we get to the shuttles, they have a fighter screen,” Wyn said. “We can’t break through that.”

“You’ll have help,” Syal said. “I promise.”

Wyn flickered again, came back. She nodded and said, “We will try. *Celestial* out.”

And then she was gone.

Jag stared at the turned-off console for a long moment. His mind was empty. His body felt slack, like it was going to fall over forever. Then somebody from across the bridge reported, “*Phoenix* is approaching, three minutes to firing range.”

Jag turned around and stared at the chaotic scene on *Starless*’s bridge. Syal, standing next to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll need to send a fighter screen to help cover them. The closest friendly is probably *Vindicator*, so we’ll send them to Vernetet.”

“What fighters?” Jag croaked.

“I’ll send the Daggers, Spades, Torches. And the Wraiths.”

“We can’t spare those.” Jag waved hand at the tactical holo. “We have a star destroyer and two Bothan cruisers inbound. We need something to defend with.”

“We’ll think of something. Right now Wynssa needs help.” Syal squeezed his shoulder. “Besides, I think Myri owes me a favor.”

Chapter 11

The first hints of dawn were creeping through the eastern sky. The veils of mist that hung between the mountains was turning shades of gray, silver, and blue. It was a sunrise unlike anything Tahiri had seen in a very long time, and she wanted to savor it, but she felt anxious. The Force was speaking to her, but she couldn't tell what it was saying. She sensed confusion and pain somewhere, not here on this mountain clearing with the Yuuzhan Vong, but somewhere far away. That could have meant elsewhere on the planet or it could have meant halfway across the galaxy.

She wished, very very badly, that she had taken some kind of long-range transmitter up the mountain. As it was, it rested with the shuttle in the bottom of the valley, and she had no intention of attempting that dangerous trek until daylight had fully crested the mountain peaks.

She stood in the clearing and watched the dark sky, half-expecting something to come out of it. Kodra Val and Scut were resting in the sleeping bags brought from the shuttle, having finally worn themselves out with shaper-talk. Vletham and Narith were curled up, asleep or at least unmoving, while Verao Shai prepared a morning fire. Qelah Kwaad was inside her daumutek, doing who-knew-what. None of them seemed agitated like she was, but she reminded herself that this was to be expected. For a long time, she'd been around Jedi and assumed Jedi-like abilities and traits from those around her. Now, after less than a day surrounded by Yuuzhan Vong, she was still getting reacquainted with their very different set of abilities.

Verao Shai was putting the last few branches on the burning pit when Qelah Kwaad emerged from her daumutek. The shaper half-stumbled outside. Her long neck was bent back and she was staring up at the pre-dawn sky.

"What is it?" Tahiri asked in Yuuzhan Vong. "What do you see?"

"Nothing," the old shaper hissed. "But my biots, my guardians... They sensed *something* approach."

Scut and Kodra Val, alerted by their speech, stirring within their sleeping bag. Tahiri pulled her lightsaber off her belt. "I feel something in the Force, some disturbance. I can't tell where exactly."

As she spoke an icy sensation stabbed into her awareness. She sensed cold, brooding determination that screamed *Sith*. There was no Sith-like anger, its icy intent and cutting ruthlessness reverberated with power of the Dark Side.

"They're coming," Tahiri muttered, shocked back to speaking in Basic.

"Who?" Scut said, flinging back his sheets.

"There." Qelah Kwaad stabbed a finger up at the sky. Tahiri stared, squinted, but saw nothing.

"What about those defenses?" Scut sounded on verge of panic. "Can't they stop it?"

Tahiri saw two flashes in the sky, then a third. Flares seemed to fall from a point overhead, tracing brilliant arcs as they fell toward the base of the mountain. Before they could reach the forest their flared again, then dissolved into darkness.

"What was that?" Kodra Val said as she rose to her feet.

"No," Qelah Kwaad said, visibly stunned. "It *can't* be."

"What can't be?" Tahiri snapped.

"He *seeded* my forest," Qelah Kwaad's shock turned to anger. "He put my pets to *sleep*."

"You mean we're defenseless?"

"*Who?*" Scut looked around. "Who's coming?"

"Vilath Dal," Kodra Val said bitterly. "It *has* to be."

Tahiri understood it all in an instant. Somehow, for some reason, Qelah Kwaad's ex-apprentice was coming back for her, and this time he wasn't going to take *no* for an answer.

And this time, he was bringing Sith,

Tahiri's lightsaber hummed to life. She heard the sound of an aircraft rending atmosphere, but no scream of engines, which meant a Yuuzhan Vong ship. She stared upward again, and finally saw the lumpy shape of a Yuuzhan Vong shuttle resolving out of the dim western sky.

Twin bursts of flame shot from the nose of the shuttle. Tahiri ducked instinctively, as did the others, but the burning rockets shot over their heads. Before Tahiri could stand and recover, the shuttle swung low over the mountainside clearing with the silent agility of a coralskipper.

A half-dozen figures flung themselves out of the hole in the port side of the shuttle. Scut was scrambling for his blaster and Narith and Kodra Val snapped their amphistaffs to life. Qelah Kwaad stood frozen beneath the shuttle as six black forms fell to earth around her.

A blood-red lightsaber blade flared to life and Tahiri charged.

Before she could get close a blast of Force energy knocked her off her feet. The Yuuzhan Vong, unaffected, charged forward to be met by five of their own. As Tahiri scrambled back up she saw a tall figure in a shaper's headdress wrap an arm around Qelah Kwaad's shoulders. The old shaper kicked and struggled and Verao Shai moved in to help her. One Yuuzhan Vong in warrior armor moved to block him, and Shai whipped his amphistaff around the warriors's legs, knocking him to the ground. Before he could raise his staff back up a brilliant red saber-blade flashed through the night, and Verao Shai's head tumbled from his shoulders and hit the damp earth with a sickening *thunk*.

Narith and Vlethem shouted in fury and charged forward. Other warriors moved to block them while the Sith turned to face Tahiri. The red glow of his lightsaber revealed a hideous face, laced with red and black tattoos in some elaborate tribal pattern, topped by a pair of devilish horns.

Tahiri charged across the clearing and the Sith charged to meet her. Their sabers clashed in the dark, hissing and spitting sparks and flashes of light. This Devaronian in swirling black robes was half a meter taller than her, almost twice as big. He pressed his saber against hers and knocked her back a full step. She pulled back, ducked beneath a wide horizontal swung, and

stabbed at his legs. She scored a shallow blow at his left calf and he jumped back, hissing.

Behind him, Tahiri saw the two shapers being pulled into the belly of the shuttle, and she knew she was already lost.

The other Yuuzhan Vong were still fighting beneath the hovering shuttle. She heard Scut's blaster pistol go off but didn't see any bolts. One Yuuzhan Vong gored another through with an amphistaff, but she couldn't tell who fell and who killed.

It flashed by in an instant. Then the Sith was on her.

He was bigger than her, stronger than her, probably more powerful in the Force too. His heavy blows knocked her back, one step, two, three, toward the edge of the clearing. In desperation and despair she tried to summon the bitterness and anger that had fueled her as Darth Caedus's apprentice.

Both came easily. Qelah Kwaad was already captured. She'd failed, yet again, just like she'd failed Anakin, failed Nen Yim, failed Jaina and Anakin's parents, failed everyone who'd ever believed in her or thought she could be something other than a billion broken pieces. She pressed forward, lightsaber moving faster than the Sith's. She knocked him back, two steps, and took another swipe at his legs. He jumped over her blade, swung his own down like a cleaver. She dropped, rolled, leaving saber-scorched earth behind. She came out of her roll and spun back to face the Sith, lightsaber raised-

-and was thrown into the forest by another Force blast. She tumbled through the dark, lightsaber spinning out of her hand. A tree knocked her shoulder, her head hit the dirt. She slammed into a fallen log and stayed there for a second and forever, dazed and pained and blind in the dark. She reached out with the Force, felt her lightsaber, turned it to life and called it to her hand. Its blue blade wheeled through the forest, slicing through branches and twigs, and its handle slapped into her hand just as the devil-horned Sith fell on her like a bird of prey.

She deflected his blade, but pinned to the base of the log it was all she could do. Blue and red blades flashed in the dark, sparking, echoing through the dark woods. Every blow seemed to stab her deeper into the ground. Her arms ached. Her hands stung. She didn't know how long she could hold.

Suddenly the Sith reared back, shouted. He spun to see what was behind him, and Tahiri saw the red of his lightsaber illuminate the hideous, animal face of Vlethem. The Extolled raised one deformed, claw-like hand in defense, while the other brought an amphistaff around for another strike.

The Sith brought his lightsaber down in one underhanded swing, effortlessly cutting Vlethem in half.

"No!" Tahiri screamed, and charged forward. Another failure, another life lost because of her. She didn't have the strength for anger any more, only bitterness and despair. She swung wildly at the Sith but he held his ground. He blocked two blows, three, then stabbed his blade forward, taking her in the side. Pain shot up from beneath her ribcage and she screamed in hot agony. She fell back, only to slam into the thick trunk of a tree. Her lightsaber hung at her side and she hadn't the strength to lift it.

The Sith before her raised his weapon and charged for the killing strike.

Live! A voice screamed in her mind.

The Sith seemed to freeze mid-blow. Her awareness reached out, her Force and her Vong-sense both. The two halves of her, so separate always, seemed unified and whole. With the Force she watched him charge, slowly. With her Vongsense, she summoned Vlethem's amphistaff to her free hand.

Strength came to her from nowhere and her arm shot up. The Sith's blade hissed and crackled against the amphistaff held high over her head. For a moment she saw the Sith's face in the light of his sparking lightsaber and she caught the shock in his eyes. Then her lightsaber whipped up. The Sith's knees went slack. His lightaber fell from his hand. His horned head tumbled off his shoulders, rolled downhill, and was lost in the brush.

Tahiri stood in the dark forest, panting. She felt a dim sensation, like a hand brushing her cheek.

Live, the voice in her head said again.

She knew in her heart it was Anakin's.

When she was ready, she staggered back up the hill by the light of her saber. When she got to the clearing the shuttle was gone, and so was Qelah Kwaad. Four Yuuzhan Vong bodies were sprawled in the clearing, Verao Shai's headless corpse

among them. Scut was there too, shifting and moaning in pain while Kodra Val tried to do something for his leg. Narith stood at the mouth of Kwaad's daumutek with an empty look in his eyes.

Tahiri shut off her lightsaber. To the east, mist glowed with the light of dawn.

At the hyperdrive shafts, they at least got a warning. What good it would do, Venku wasn't sure. He knew that he, for one, was not in any condition to fight off an invasion by whoever was coming for them.

Shrill alert sirens wailed through the air. People swarmed around the three shuttles on the landing pad, stuffing them full of supplies in preparation for an emergency retreat. There was no way to fit everyone and everything in the, and anyone able-bodied and capable of fighting was being asked to stay here and defend the hyperdrive cores.

"You sure you don't want to go, *Kad'ika*?" Mereel asked from his side.

Venku looked at the old clone. "You sure *you* don't?"

Mereel laughed. "Just a few days back I bagged me an Imperial Moff. I can handle a few *Vongese*."

That was Mereel, of course, brash and bragging to the end. He looked to see Gotab walking across the landing bay from the command center. Bess, Jendri, and Jaina Solo were not far behind.

"*Oya, Bard'ika!*" Mereel called. "You taking the last ship out?"

Gotab had his eyes on Venku. "I think I'll be staying here."

"I already explained," Jaina said, "I need Bess and Jendri here. We don't have many people who can can fight."

"What's the matter, *Jetii*?" Mereel crossed his arms over his armored chest. "Think I'm too old to bust some *vongese* gett'se?"

"I won't make you." Jaina looked at Venku. "I won't make you either."

"I won't leave my people behind," Venku said firmly. He might not be able to run-and-gun, but he figured he could sit-and-snipe if he had to.

"Okay," Jaina sighed. "Well, they should be here any minute. I want you at defensive positions along the north engine's rim."

"What are we looking at here?" Mereel asked. "*Vongese*? Daala?"

"One Yuuzhan Vong landing ship," she said grimly.

"Hah!" Mereel barked. "I can eat one of those for breakfast."

"It's afternoon, *ba'buir*," Jendri muttered.

"Hey now," Mereel spun on him. "I'll have you know—"

"Fierfek," Jaina said. "Incoming, seven o'clock."

All eyes went to the sky above. Something had pierced the overcast cloud layer; from here it looked like a dark ovoid hovering over the landscape, but it was getting incrementally larger.

"Stations," Jaina commanded. "*Now!*"

As Jaina darted off, Bess looked up at the sky, sighed, and said, "I wish they'd let me keep my *buy'ce*."

"No kidding," Mereel grunted.

Venku knew the feeling. All he had were the lightsabers at his hip and the Verpine sniper rifle slung over his shoulder. Normally the Verp's targeting system patched directly into his helmet HUD, but since they'd left their *buy'ce* back at the village, he'd have to use the built-in scope.

Bess and Jendri broke into a jog, quick but not so fast it left the old guys breathing dust. Venku could walk fast so long as he was on even ground, and that's what he did now, as the Sekotan shuttles kicked up air and pushed themselves off the landing pad.

"Isn't this *shabla* planet supposed to defend itself?" Mereel said as they reached the rim of the north engine well.

"Only when it wants to, apparently," Gotab said.

"What kind of deal is that?" Mereel said as he checked the gas canister in his BlasTech E-67 carbine.

"Don't ask me. Will of the Force."

"You getting anything?" Mereel looked to Gotab, then Venku. "From the Force, I mean?"

Gotab shook his head, Venku too. The old clone swore, then lay his body flat along the thick metal edge of the shaft. There was a railing all around to prevent people from just tumbling

in, but if you went down on your belly you had enough space to squeeze head, shoulders, and the rest of you through.

But that was the last thing Venku wanted. He tried a short trot along the rim, but found himself exhausted after just twenty meters. That still gave him a different angle of fire from Gotab and Mereel, so he dropped to his belly and prepped his rifle. The clone and the ex-Jedi were doing the same, while Jendri and Bess rode the lift down several levels into the shaft to join with some of the other defenders.

Venku spared a moment to wonder where Jaina Solo had gone off to.

Then the attack began.

The Yuuzhan Vong shuttle swung over the south engine first. It however for a moment around the base of the vane, some thirty meters over the mouth of the shaft, and dropped two dozen Yuuzhan Vong paratroopers like seed spores.

It swung over to the north shaft to do the same, but at least they had a warning. Venku rolled on his back and began firing manually upward at the shuttle as it passed. Gotab, Mereel, and the other defenders on top did the same. Laser blasts smoked the rock-like hull of the shuttle, and when the portal opened on its starboard side to let the paratroopers fall, the *Mandos* concentrated all the fire they had on it. Two *vongese* got riddled in the chest and fell into the bottomless shaft without evening firing their 'chutes. Venku rolled onto his belly, brought up the scope, and plugged another in his big ugly forehead right as he fell into the mouth of the shaft. Others kept falling, and began throwing down their explosive thud bugs at Jendri, Bess, and the other defenders inside the shaft.

The hand-held laserfire had apparently damaged the shuttle. It wobbled soundlessly over the north shaft, then lurched away. Venku rolled onto his back again to track it, and saw that it was heading for the central vane.

Thunder clapped and shockwave tore through the air. He heard Mereel give a surprised yelp as a concussion mission tore through the *vongese* shuttle. It dropped like a rock in the middle of the landing bay, pouring black smoke into the sky. Venku adjusted his position to see the big Wookiee with a shoulder-mount missile launcher standing at the entrance to the

command center, waving her furry arms in the air and roaring victoriously.

Then three black streaks raced out of the burning wreck-age, faster than any human or Vong. The Wookiee was thrown to the ground and let out a scream of pain. A group of humans burst out of the command center's blast doors, dropped to their knees, and began firing at whatever black beasts had burst onto the scene. They looked like some mad hybrid between a lizard and an akk dog, with three canted legs on either side, furry bodies, scaled muscular tails, and wide flat snouts with toothy, snapping jaws.

They tore down one human, then another. Venku gaped in awe and horror, not even paying attention to the fight in the shaft. He brought up his rifle, stared through the scope, though he had no hope of actually nailing of these monsters.

Then, staring through the scope of his rifle, he saw the flash of a blue lightsaber blade. He'd seen Jaina Solo fight before, but not like this. She moved like an airborne acrobat, a blur of dark camo jumpsuit and dark-brown hair, leaping, spinning, thrusting, barely touching ground. She sheared off all three legs from one side of a monster, sending it thrashing helplessly on the ground while the soldiers poured laserfire down its gaping, howling mouth. She went after another monster, slicing at its tail to get its attention. Its massive body wheeled around with incredible speed, and it seemed to vomit something from its open mouth. Solo leaped, dodging it, and threw herself over the back of the monster, trailing a streak of smoke and gore with her lightsaber. The monster howled, screamed, thrashed.

A soldier, too close, was literally torn in half by its whipping tail. The other soldiers kept firing, and Jaina threw herself in the air one last time, coming down saber-first, stabbing it right through the top of its head. For a moment she froze, lightsaber buried to the hilt right between its eyes, blowing blue tip jutting out of its throat. Then she pulled her saber out, jumped off, and let the monster collapse lifeless on the gore- and debris-strewn landing pad.

He couldn't see the last one.

"*Kad'ika!*" someone shouted, Gotab or Mereel. He pulled his eye away from the scope just in time to see it charging at him

from his right flank. He froze, dead-stopped, as the monster bore down on him with jaws open wide.

Something slammed into the monster, knocking it off course. Its six legs scrambled for purchase as Gotab dug his lightsaber into the monster's side. It locked, somehow, between the beast's armored plating, and as the old man struggled to wrench it free, the monster's body twisted. Its tail whipped around, and its tip snapped through Gotab's left calf. Venku heard a sickening crunch, heard the old man wail, and saw him pitch forward. The monster spun on Gotab, Venku forgotten, and opened its hungry mouth.

Then Jaina Solo was there. She threw herself at its other side and sliced off one leg. The monster roared and tried to take her town with its whipping tail. Venku, finally, scrambled to his feet. His balance was poor, his chest breathless, but he plucked his mother's lightsaber from his belt and threw himself at the animal.

It was so distracted by Jaina and Gotab that it had forgotten its original quarry. He thrust both blades into its side, one of them digging deeper into the wound Gotab had already made. The beast screamed, struggled. Jaina Solo leap forward one more time, thrust her saber right into the monster's eye and spearing hot energy through its brain. The massive body suddenly went limp and collapsed on the ground.

Veku and Jaina stared at each other over the dead monster's back, breathless, thankful it was finally over.

Then Gotab screamed.

They whirled in unison to see a Yuuzhan Vong warrior standing over the old man, amphistaff driven in between the armor plates on his back, pinning him to the ground. Gotab, face-down, writhed in agony as the Vong pulled the staff out of his gut with a sickening sound. Behind him, another was climbing out of the shaft.

Venku roared and charged. Lost in unthinking rage he slashed with both sabers, knocking the Vong's amphistaff out of its hand. He kept hacking, tearing one arm off its shoulder, scoring a deep gouge in its side. Finally, he brought both sabers to bear and tore its head from its shoulders.

Behind it, the other Vong tumbled to the ground, blaster smoke pouring from the back of its head. Mereel was already getting to his feet and running for Gotab.

All three of them converged on the old man. Jaina rolled him over, carefully, but blood was already spilling out from beneath him. His wrinkled old face was twisted in pain but Jaina grabbed one hand, held it tight.

Mereel bent over him, muttering "*Bard'ika, Bard'ika, don't go Bard'ika...*"

Venku only stared, wordless, breathless, and helpless. He could feel it. He could feel him fading in the Force, this man who had trained him, saved him over and over again, guided him since he was a very small child, and he knew there was nothing he could do. He grabbed Gotab's free hand and squeezed it. It wasn't enough, but it was all he had.

Then the ground started to rumble, and he knew things were going to get even worse.

Some deep and awful roaring sounded within the engine shafts. A sound filled the air, like the sky being torn in two. He stared up, they all stared up, even as Gotab died before them.

It looked like a knife had torn through the clouds overhead, and the sky beyond was changing colors before his eyes.

Even before she got to Ben, Vestara knew something had gone wrong.

The initial plan, as she understood it, was to send four assault teams to strike different locations on Zonama Sekot. One shuttle, loaded with voxyn and Yuuzhan Vong warriors, had been sent to disable the planet's hyperdrive core and prevent it from fleeing. The second had been sent to the mountaintop sanctuary where some Yuuzhan Vong shaper was hiding; Vilath Dal and Darth Vidious spear-headed that attack. Another attack team had been sent to ravage the largest settlement in the Far Distance, but it had been shot out of the sky during the initial approach on Zonama Sekot.

The fourth team, riding not a Yuuzhan Vong shuttle but the ancient Sith meditation sphere, was Vestara's own.

She did not have to direct the vessel, or search out Ben through the Force and pinpoint his location. Somehow, Ship

knew exactly where he would be. It plunged into the planet's atmosphere and crept into its night-side shadow, so eager to find its former master that Vestara felt vaguely insulted.

As Ship approached the village where Ben must be, she felt a stab of pain through the Force. Somehow, deep inside, she understood that Darth Vidious was dead. She didn't know *how* she knew; the Devaronian Sith Lord had been no mentor to her like Lady Rhea, but he had at least been a guide for a short time, close enough to create a bond in the Force. But she knew he was dead, which meant the mission to capture the Shaper had probably gone bad too.

Vestara focused on the pain, drew strength from it. She'd lost so much already, Vidious was just fuel to the fire that would power her onward.

Through Ship's translucent walls, Vestara could see the faint lights of a village below, strewn out along what looked to be a small valley. The four Yuuzhan Vong warriors crammed inside the ship with her stirred anxiously, clutching their amphistaffs to their chests. Vestara still felt strange and nervous with these beings she could not sense in the Force, but so far they had shown no sign of turning on her. They knew, without fully understanding why, that the One Sith and True Honor had conjoined fates, and one fell and rose with the other. In that, they were just like Vestara.

Ship dove deep, hungry. Its voice echoed in Vestara's mind. *He is here. Here!*

"Okay," Vestara muttered. "Take me to him."

The Yuuzhan Vong stared at her, but said nothing. Ship swooped in low over the village, over low dome-shaped buildings lit from inside by burning fires. The entire scene was shockingly primitive, and Vestara felt a surge of excitement. If this village, this whole planet, was still living in the dark ages, overtaking it should be easy.

The rear portal of the meditation sphere suddenly opened, blowing cool fresh air into the ship. The Yuuzhan Vong let out a war cry and hurled themselves into the street.

Vestara looked around Ship's empty interior, said, "Wait here," and threw herself after them.

At this time of the night the street was indeed empty. The warriors charged out to cause havoc, which was all their mission entailed. They were a distraction, a way to keep this village confused while she sought out Ben. She stood beneath the hovering sphere, red lightsaber ignited before her, and reached out with the Force, trying to pick up his familiar Force signature. She found the faint life-signals of non-Jedi, but nothing similar to the one she'd known so well, cherished, loved in her moments of weakness.

"Where is he?" she said aloud, looking up at Ship. "You said he was here!"

He vanished, it said, *Like a blinking eye*.

"What?" she spat angrily. "What does that mean? Is he here or isn't he?"

Then she heard it, the *snap-hiss-hum* of a lightsaber coming to life. She turned and saw a figure standing in the entrance to a low domed building, holding a glowing blade before it. Vestara stepped closer, reached out with the Force. This was not Ben's lightsaber... And it was not *Ben*. She stepped closer, and in the figure's silhouette saw the shape of a woman, tall, long pale hair pulled off of her face. This woman was touching on the Force, drawing strength from it, but in a feeble half-trained way.

"Who are you?" Vestara said as she stepped closer. She held her blade in front of her but did not slow in caution. Whatever this woman was, Vestara wasn't scared of her.

"Stay back," the woman said. The fear in her voice was obvious.

Vestara snorted. "You're not a Jedi."

"I'm not," the woman admitted.

"Where did you get that lightsaber?"

"It's mine."

Vestara shook her head. "You don't want to cross me. Just tell me where Ben Skywalker is. That's all I want."

Somewhere in the distance, people began to scream. The woman's lightsaber dropped slightly as she strained to hear, and Vestara chose that moment the strike. The woman held up her saber to block one blow, then another. Vestara forced her back so her shoulder-blades pressed against the frame of the door.

Vestara grinned. It wasn't often she got to pin down someone weaker than her, someone utterly at her mercy. It was a good feeling and she savored it.

"Where is Ben Skywalker? Tell me! Tell me or I'll kill you!"

The woman snarled and took a swing as Vestara. Her thoughts bled into the Force and her attacks were easy to counter. The Sith sidestepped the blow and gave the woman a lazy, easy jab in the thigh. The woman screamed and dropped her lightsaber. She slumped against the doorframe, clutching her smoking leg.

"Is that all you can stand?" Vestara hissed. "What kind of fake Jedi are you?"

She held a hand before her and pinched two fingers together. The woman rose slowly into the air and her hands clawed vainly at her throat. Her head tilted back and choking sounds escaped her mouth as Vestara slowly squeezed her trachea tighter and tighter, until it was on the verge of snapping.

Then, behind her: *Snap-hiss-hum*.

Vestara tossed the woman to the ground and turned around. There he was, standing in the middle of the street, right beneath Ship. He had a violet blade but she knew it was Ben. However he'd hidden himself before, he now screamed at her through the Force.

"Hello, Ben." Vestara raised her lightsaber and stepped slowly toward him. "It's been a while."

"Not long enough, Ves," Ben said.

"I'm not trying to kill you," she said.

"Then don't make me kill you," Ben said. She could hear his honesty, feel his emotions in the Force. He was ready to fight her, but he was not willing to kill her, and that was why he would lose.

She lunged, taking a swipe at his legs. Ben blocked, skirted back. They circled each other beneath Ship, and the meditation sphere's thoughts echoed in both their minds.

Good, good, it goaded them. *Anger, pain, suffering, give each other what you deserve*.

"Shut up," Ben hissed. "I should have karking left you on Zioist."

That was to our fate, Ben Skywalker. Together we three are to find the end of the Jedi and the new beginning of the Sith.

"Not likely," Ben said, and lunged at Vestara. He went for her legs too, and she pushed his blade aside with her own. They traded quick feints, always aiming for limbs, neither willing to strike at vital organs.

"You don't have to do this, Ves," Ben said. If he thought she was taking it easy on him because she was soft, well, good. She could turn that to her advantage.

She lunged forward and swung low, like she wanted to cut his legs off at the thigh. He blocked and gave her a Force shove, knocking her three steps back. He lunged after her, thrusting at her. She sidestepped and swiped down where his leg should have been, but he rolled to avoid her. He kicked up dirt as he rose back to his feet and spun around to block her downward swing. That one would have taken him right in the face, but he caught her blade with his own.

"Come on, Ves," Ben hissed. "I don't know who's making you do this, but you don't have to!"

Could he know about Krayt, about the strange dreams the Dark Lord had as he floated between death and life? No, impossible. Yet doubt flicked through her- doubt of Ben, doubt of her own willingness to deliver him to the dragon- and in that moment Ben pushed against her blade. His two arms were stronger than her one, and she stumbled back. Ben swiped horizontally at her midsection, cutting right above her hand. Her lightsaber sparked, flashed, and her blade died. She threw the smoking thing to the ground and suddenly stood before Ben, helpless.

Ben took a step closer. He held out his spare hand while keeping his lightsaber ignited at his side.

"Come on, Ves," he said. "You don't want to kill me and I don't want to kill you. We can give this all up, Ves. All this Sith and Jedi stuff, just live like *people*. That's what you always wanted, isn't it?"

Vestara shook her head violently. "No. You're a fool. You don't understand."

"Yes I do, Ves." The violet blade of his lightsaber receded, disappeared, and he stood before her as a dirty, panting, tired young man with pleading eyes.

It was tempting, *so* tempting, to reach out and take his hand. Half her soul cried to do so. She didn't know what she'd do afterward, where they'd go together, but she knew it would be far, far away from all of this...

But Lady Khai, Ship said, That is not your destiny.

She reached out with the Force. The blond woman's lightsaber, lying discarded in the dirt, hissed to life. It flew through the air, a wheel of deadly light heading straight at Ben's flank. He pivoted and brought his own saber to life just in time to deflect it and send it spinning back into the street. It cut up a trail of dust before its light winked out.

By then, Vestara was on him.

She didn't even use the Force. She came at him from the side when he was distracted and slammed a knee up right between his legs. He wheezed, dropped his lightsaber. She cracked an elbow right in his forehead, and the great heir to the Jedi order collapsed in the dust like a sack of vegetables.

Good, good, Ship cried gleefully. Come, Lady Khai! There is not much time!

Vestara picked up Ben's lightsaber and hooked it on her belt. Then she picked up Ben's limp body with the Force and floated it into Ship's open portal. With a short Force-propelled hop, she landed herself inside too.

We must go, Lady Khai! Ship had suddenly gone from gleeful to panicked, and Vestara's sense of triumph disappeared.

"What about the Vong?" she asked. She could still hear them attacking villagers somewhere in the distance.

No time! Ship cried, and suddenly it flew into the air.

The force of the acceleration slammed Vestara into the deck right next to Ben's unconscious form. She knew she'd have to bind him before he woke up, but Ship's mad flight was more worrying. Cold air rushed into the open portal until Ship remembered to close it. Through the translucent walls, she saw the lights of the village quickly shrink below her.

"What is it?" she demanded, but Ship gave no answer.

Suddenly the sky began to change colors. She looked at the night overhead and saw streaks of light overcome the stars.

"Ship!" she shouted. "What's happening? Is it-"

Suddenly everything shook. She had the sensation of tumbling, falling helplessly out of the sky. She was surrounded by whirling light and then her head slammed into something and all she knew was black.

Chapter 12

As her Clawcraft shuddered beneath her and the inside of *Celestial's* hangar gave way to a starfield torn by explosions and lancing plasma, Wynssa Fel felt nothing but shame.

She was leading the last flight of Clawcraft left on *Celestial*, but even then, it felt like she was abandoning everything: her ship, her crew, the responsibilities she'd fought to gain for so long.

The one salve was being in a Clawcraft again. She'd trained in the nimble fighters since she was a teenager, eager to follow the path blazed by her older pilot siblings: Davin, Cherriss, most especially Jag. She'd admired them all, only to lose them one by one to flaming, heroic death; or in Jag's case, to a Jedi wife.

Then she was tumbling through space, lost in the moment, jerking her fighter's control stick this way and that, dodging green laser blasts as she tried to protect the evacuation shuttles punching their way through the fighter screen toward the distant gray wedge of *Vindicator*. The second regenade destroyer, *Resolve*, had already broken away from *Celestial's* drifting corpse to reengage Captain Vernetet's ship. Combined with the attacks from the three nimble *Marauder*-class corvettes, they would deliver a major pounding, and she did not know how much Vernetet was willing to take just to rescue scraps of *Celestial's* crew.

Vernetet's own TIE Interceptors had pulled back just as three squadrons from *Starless* had arrived. The melange of Clawcraft, E-wings, and X-wings were still outnumbered by

the swarming TIEs from *Chimaera* and *Resolve*, but at least now Wynssa could tell who was friend and who was foe. She dropped in behind a TIE interceptor that was lining up for a run on one of the shuttles and pumped blue laser blasts into its central cockpit, creating an exploding that sent both dagger-shaped solar panels spinning in different directions.

"Commodore," one of her pilots' voices crackled in her ear. "Time is almost up. Self-destruct imminent."

"Copy," Wynssa said, and turned her comlink onto the broadest Chiss frequency. "All ships, self-destruct imminent. Clear *Celestial*, repeat, clear *Celestial*."

She kicked her engines hard, outpacing the shuttles. She rolled her Clawcraft into a tight arc that pulled her back around to face *Celestial*, this time from a safe distance.

Despite herself, she felt despair claw at her chest. *Celestial* had been her command, her responsibility, but in the end it had been helpless against the combined onslaught of two Imperial star destroyers. Now its systems were dead, and its graceful dark body slowly drifted away from the ugly wedge of *Chimaera*. She saw that Admiral Daala's destroyer was breaking away, her boarding shuttles returning to berth. They must have discovered the self-destruct countdown.

A shame, Wynssa thought. She'd so wanted to take Daala with her.

There was a brilliant flash of light. Wynssa jerked her craft away lest she be blinded, even though the shaded lenses of her helmet. When the light dimmed, *Celestial's* charred, blackened, twisted hull remained. She looked eagerly for damage to *Chimaera* and saw some black scoring on the destroyer's underside, but nothing critical.

"All Chiss craft," she told the general frequency, "Punch for *Vindicator*. Go, now!"

She hoped to take advantage of the confusion left by *Celestial's* self-destruct. Unfortunately, it seemed the Imperial pilots had been told in advance. Most of them had escaped the blast and were now making runs on the fleeing shuttles. One right in front of Wynssa burst into flames and she had to roll hard to port to keep from running through the blossoming debris field.

Just as she pulled out of her roll, a chain of TIE fighters swooped down from the port side. Their laser fire splattered over Wynssa's shields, jerking her in her cockpit. Two dropped behind her and began lancing green plasma at her clawcraft.

As she moved to evade, something black flashed against the starfield ahead of her. She glanced at her tactical screen and saw both TIEs suddenly wink out.

"Chiss ships, this is Wraith Squadron," a harsh, mechanical voice grated on her headset. The Gamorrean, SaBinring. "Is Commodore Fel with you? Repeat, did Commodore Fel evacuate?"

Wynssa switched to a matching frequency. "Commodore Fel reporting, Wraith One. One of your birds just blew TIEs off me."

"Thank the Force," a woman's voice said with relief. "My sister said she'll bust my butt if I don't get yours home safe."

Wynssa was about to ask just what she was talking about when light flared in the corner of her vision. She tilted her clawcraft to allow her a better view of the planet. Her jaw dropped in shock as a great banner of rainbow light, like a glimmering aurora, seemed to stretch out of Zonama Sekot's atmosphere and reach into lower orbit.

Suddenly the rainbow light swept through space like a downward arm. It cut through a cluster of ships- a True Victory destroyer, two gunships, a carrier, and the Mon Cal interdictor- and all of them disappeared in a giant fiery blossom.

Then another banner of light appeared, this one stabbing through space and punching through both of the Bothan cruisers moving in to attack *Starless*.

It was Sekot, Wynssa thought in awe. She'd heard this living planet could take extraordinary means to defend itself, but she'd never been one to believe in fantastic stories. She'd never even believed there was some governing consciousness. She'd thought it all fairy tales made up by the Jedi, but now the raw evidence of Sekot's power left her breathless.

Then there was another flash of light, and the planet was gone.

"What happened?" one of the Wraiths was squawking. "Where'd it go?"

"It's gone," SaBinring pronounced. His mechanical voice managed a tone of gravity. "Zonama Sekot... *left*."

Jagged Fel struggled to stand upright. Every single crewman on *Starless* had suddenly been thrown to the deck by the unexpected turbulence, and Jag himself had hit his head on the tactical console before going down. As he clutched his bleeding forehead a hysterical corner of his mind thought, *At least I didn't lose the other eye.*

He grabbed the console with both hands and pulled himself to his feet. Before he could bark orders Syal Antilles shouted, "All hands, at your stations! Tactical team, report!"

Someone said, "The planet, Captain... It's gone!"

Gone. The word seemed to reverberate forever in Jag's head. Ben. Tahiri. *Jaina.*

Gone.

Maybe the Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators had done something, maybe the planet had somehow chosen to flee on its own, maybe the engines had misfired somehow.

He might never know.

He might never see his wife again.

Jagged tried to calm himself. The entire battle had left him in a state of constant near-panic but now he shoved it all down and found the orderly disciplined officer he'd been bred to be, the kind they all needed right now.

"Give me a status on the fleet," he said. The tactical holo was down so he turned his attention to the front viewport and tried to make sense of the broad swathe of warships and debris.

"Zonama Sekot... *did* something, sir," a dumbfounded lieutenant said.

"Both Bothan cruisers are gone," another reported. "*Phoenix* seems to be... adrift in space. Engines down."

"What about ours?"

"*Vindicator* and *Swift* were far enough away."

"What about *Andromeda*?" Kre'fey asked as the old Bothan pulled himself to his feet, claws scraping across the console metal. A streak of red blood gleamed against the white fur of his snout.

After a long, grim pause, the lieutenant said, "She's gone, sir. All the ships there, the gunships, the vic... They're all *gone*. No, wait, the cruiser, *Sunbeam*, she's drifting in space but she's intact... I think."

"What about the starfighters?" Jag wiped a trickle of blood off his eyebrow.

"It's... Hard to tell. There's so much debris..."

"Sirs!" the comm lieutenant said, "We're getting a transmission from Vernedet."

"Put him on," Jag said.

"Commander, we're having problems with the holo-emitter."

"Audio, then," Kre'fey snapped. "Do it now."

A second later, the old Imperial's voice reverberated on the bridge. "*Starless*, this *Vindicator*. We're bringing the last Chiss ships in now. What in space just happened?"

Jag's relief to have recovered Wyn was a mild balm on the latest catastrophe. He said, "The planet just jumped to hyperspace. Before that it... defended itself against True Victory."

"I can *see* that," Vernedet grunted. "Commander, I- wait. It looks like Daala is on the move."

Jag cursed inwardly. Daala still had two star destroyers, an interdicator, and three Marauder corvettes that had been out of range of Sekot's attack. Out the viewport, he could see the two Mon Cal cruisers loyal to Aref'ja firing their sublight engines. Sekot may have taken out half the True Victory fleet, but including Daala's forces, what was left was enough to tackle the broken ships Jag had.

"Commander," the tactical lieutenant said, "Daala just jumped to hyperspace."

Vernedet said, "*Starless*, she just jumped. Repeat-"

"We saw, Captain, thank you." Jag breathed. He could see the two Mon Cal ships, apparently unharmed by Zonama Sekot's attack, hovering in the middle of space like they were uncertain what to do.

Well, though Jag, that makes three of us.

"Communications," he said, "Hail those Mon Cal ships, the, ah-"

"*Lacentra* and *Niathal*," Kre'fey supplied.

"Right," Jag nodded, suddenly very tired. "Hail *Sunbeam* and *Phoenix* too. Tell them we will accept their surrender should they choose to offer it."

Half the crew stared at him, uncertain what to say. These ships, their crews and officers, had been Alliance, yes, but they'd also just fought a pitched battle that had claimed thousands of crew and officers from Trinity Fleet.

"Now, comm," Syal said firmly.

"Yes, ma'am." The lieutenant began to adjust the frequency.

Syal walked over to the tactical console against which Jag and Kre'fey both leaned, weak and bleeding. Jag's cousin looked disheveled, yes, but unharmed physically.

"Do you think they'll do it?" she asked.

"We have to give them the option," Jag said.

"And if they don't take it?"

"Sirs!" the communication officer called. "*Lacentra* says she will surrender."

Jag felt breath go out of him. "What about the others?"

"*Niathal* is considering the offer. Nothing from *Phoenix* or *Sunbeam*."

"Those ships are damaged. They might not be receiving our transmissions," Kre'fey said.

"They're also in no shape to fight," said Jag. "With *Lacentra* down *Niathal* should follow."

"What about *Phoenix*?" Syal asked. Her eyes held on Kre'fey.

The Bothan licked specks of blood from his canines. He pushed himself away from the console and started walking toward the communications station.

"Lieutenant," he said, "Hail *Phoenix* again. Tell them I want to speak with Bren Aref'ja, personally."

When the light had lashed out of Zonama Sekot like a brilliant deadly rainbow, Miranda Fardreamer had expected to die. A part of her had been filled with dread, but another felt a surge of surprising joy unlike anything she could remember.

But then the light receded and she was alive, again, and things were worse than ever.

Zonama Sekot's shocking attack and equally shocking disappearance had left *Phoenix*'s normally orderly bridge in a state

of total chaos. The force of the attack had collapsed *Phoenix's* shields and tore open the decks hastily repaired since the fight in the nebula. The command tower had taken massive concussive force that wrenched its support structure, burst the aft bulkhead, and sent shrapnel cutting through the air like hundreds of flying knives.

Miranda and most of the crew in the pit had escaped unscathed, but many on the upper level had been instantly and messily killed. Miranda had seen Aref'ja fall and was sure he was dead. Captain Welby was bleeding from the head and right leg but was trying to hold things together, even though she could barely stand.

When she'd called Miranda out of the pit to replace the crew at the comm station, the Bothan had shocked them both by rising to his feet. As he staggered toward Welby, Miranda saw that he was clutching his left arm with his right. Everything below the elbow, uniform and silver fur alike, were dyed red with blood that dripped slowly and steadily onto the shrapnel-laden deck. She wondered how much time he had in him. She wondered how many *any* of them had.

Miranda's technical knowledge of communication systems was minimal, and she spent several minutes handing tools to a lanky, brown-furred Froz lieutenant who was the only one of the communications crew not cut down by shrapnel and lying dead at their feet. The Froz did something to bring the console back online, and a bright red beacon winked on and off.

"What does that mean?" Miranda asked.

"Incoming call," the Froz rasped. His punched a button, bent close to the speaker grill on the console, and said, "This is *Phoenix*. Please repeat your message."

"This is Traest Kre'fey on *Starless*. I wish to speak with Admiral Aref'ja. Is he alive?"

Kre'fey. Dazed by the shock of the attack, by the gore and burnt debris strewn around her, it took her a second to place the name. The biggest hero of the Yuuzhan Vong war, Aref'ja's mentor, was on the line, *right now*.

"Admiral-" she called, spinning around to look for Aref'ja. She was shocked to find him right in front of her. His silver fur was matted with sweat, dirt and other people's blood. His own

dripped steadily from the red, mangled mess of his left arm while his right paw pinched the blood vessels above his elbow to slow the bleeding. His gold eyes were half-focused and his mouth panted open.

"A-Admiral," Miranda stuttered. "It's.... Admiral Kre'fey."

Aref'ja blinked once, twice. A little focus came into his eyes. He rasped, "Step aside, Ensign."

Miranda scooted back, nearly tripping over the maimed corpse of a Rodian. Still clutched his left arm, Aref'ja leaned in close to the speaker grill and said, "This is Aref'ja."

"You're alive." Relief was palpable in the the voice "Bren, listen to me. You have to surrender."

Aref'ja's body retched in a soundless, humorless laugh.

"Bren," Kre'fey pressed, "Half your fleet is destroyed. Admiral Daala has taken her destroyers and fled. Captain Ginus has surrendered *Lacentra*. Trev Varin just did the same. All your other ships are destroyed or dead in space."

Aref'ja picked his head up with effort and looked out the viewport. Miranda followed his gaze and saw the dark-grey wedge of *Starless* gliding closer. In front of it was the black, twisted remains of a Bothan Assault Cruiser's aft engine section; *Fey'lya* or *Dey'rylan*, she couldn't tell, and it probably didn't matter now.

Aref'ja swallowed and said to his crew, "Engines, report."

No one said anything at first. Then someone called, "Sublight down. Hyperdrive down."

"Bren!" Kre'fey shouted over the com. "There's no point in fighting. You have *lost*. Don't throw away your life! Don't throw away the lives of your crew."

Aref'ja leaned in close to the speaker and hissed, "I have a mission!"

"Your mission is over!" Kre'fey insisted.

Aref'ja insisted. "I'm not... not your man any more." Aref'ja turned back to the crew. "I need weapons report!"

"Enough good people have already died, Bren."

"Port turbolaser bank online," Welby said. "Forward bank, online. Starboard... offline."

A chill shot down Miranda's spine. He was going to do it. He was going to order those turbolaser banks to fire on *Starless*.

They had no chance of winning, no chance of escape, they couldn't even move, but Aref'ja was broken enough, desperate enough, mad enough at the carnage around him to order one last suicidal attack.

And standing right next to him, staring at the face of certain, absolute death, Miranda Fardreamer realized she didn't want to die after all. Not here. Not like this. Not for nothing.

Her mother had died for nothing; her father had died for nothing. She wanted to *live* for something, anything.

"Bren, *please*," Kre'fey was pleading, half-forgotten over the comlink. "Do you think Evyn would want this?"

That name, whatever it meant, snapped Aref'ja out of his battle-dazed stupor. He leaned over the console and said, "Don't you dare, Traest. Don't you *dare* bring her into this."

"You already have," Kre'fey accused. "There's no point in calling down more death. Surrender, surrender now, and I promise no harm will come to you."

"We're *renegades*," Aref'ja snarled. "Criminals. Each and every one of us. We betrayed the Alliance. We just *murdered* thousands of our fellow officers. What do you think you're going to *do* with us?"

"I can't decide that myself," Kre'fey said. "But if you help us, join our fleet, you'll probably get a general amnesty for most of your people."

Aref'ja head wagged from side to side. "No. No no no. We went out here to kill the Yuuzhan Vong, to *annihilate* them. We came here to finish the job you couldn't, Traest. We're not going to help you save the enemy."

"Then save your *friends*. We've lost half our fleet and Daala is still out there. The renegade Yuuzhan Vong fleet, True Honor, they're still out there too. If you don't help us, *all* of us will die out here."

Aref'ja blinked, swayed on his feet. "True Honor?"

"They broke off from Zonama Sekot to wage war against their old enemy. Sound familiar?"

"No no no," Aref'ja said. "They're... The enemy. They don't... They're not like..."

The Bothan's strength gave out. His knees buckled and he pitched forward. Miranda grabbed him by one shoulder, the

Froze by the other, and they help him upright. His left paw still clutched his right elbow, curtailing the blood loss. It was the only thing keeping him conscious right now. His head rolled weakly to the right, and for a moment his gold eyes settled on Miranda's.

“The war is over, Bren,” Kre'fey said. “The war ended a long time ago.”

Arefja swayed, but Miranda held him upright. His jaw worked up and down wordlessly before he finally found the strength to say, “All right. We surrender. We surrender.”

Part III: The Sword

"You've always been looking beyond things, Jacen. You always wonder if whatever you have is it, if it's all it could be."

Jaina Solo to her brother, 25 years ABY

"They call me the Sword of the Jedi. That's supposed to be my destiny. It's odd how the prophecies only make sense when it's too late."

Jaina Solo to Bardan Jusik, 41 years ABY

"Jacen likes hurting people. He scares me."

"He'll never scare you again, Allana, I promise."

Allana Solo Djo and Jaina Solo, 41 years ABY

A LONG TIME AGO...

Jaina pauses for a moment near the mouth of the waystation's hangar bay and watches stars drift past. Invisible amidst the sprawl is a lonely planet, their target, Qoribu. Only an invisible force field separates the pressurized bubble of the hangar and the cold void of space. She normally doesn't think about that sort of thing but it gives her a chill now. Something is calling to her from the void, something she can't explain, something that had dragged her all the way out to the Unknown Regions of space.

At least she finally has her brother by her side again.

She hears the clap of boots on the deck behind her and turns around. She already knew it would be Jacen. Behind him, the rest of the Jedi buzz around their parked spaceships, doing final system checks before venturing further into uncharted space. Little Tahiri ducks under the fin of her Sekotan organic ship while Lowbacca is on top, long furry arms dangling out of the cockpit. Alema Rar nimbly gives her ship a look-over and passes unwanted, winning smiles at Zekk. Tiny Tekli rubs her furry snout and awkwardly climbs toward her X-wing's cockpit, going up a ladder not made for short Chandra-Fan limbs. Tesar Sebatyne ascends his own ladder with fluid reptilian grace.

She remembers, very well, when they were last all together like this. That time there had been others. Tenel Ka, for one, now imprisoned in her palace on Hapes. And, of course, the dead. Ganner Rhysode. Ulaha Kore. Bela and Krasov Hara. Eryl Besa. Jovan Drark. Raynar Thul.

Anakin.

"I know what you're thinking," Jacen says with a joyless smile.

"You always do," Jaina replies. And it's literally true. Their twin bond has meant she'd had a constant companion for almost all her life. When she'd thought Jacen, too, had died on that mission to Myrkr, she'd thought half of her life was gone forever.

Jacen has been away once more, this time on a five-year journey through the stars, seeking new ways of viewing the Force. That's her brother, always curious, always striving. She's missed him, though. Today is her first time seeing him in five whole years.

She looks at him, trying to figure out what has changed. A lot can happen in five years- the Yuuzhan Vong War, for instance- and the Jacen who's come back from his odyssey is like the Jacen she remembered- the Jacen who was half her life- but subtly different, and she can't pin down how or why.

"What is it?" Jacen raises both eyebrows.

"Nothing," Jaina looks away, at the void. She hadn't realized she'd been staring.

"Okay," Jacen chuckles softly and steps up to her side. He stares out at the stars too and says, "It's strange, isn't it? All of us, feeling the same call through the Force, drawing us from every corner of the galaxy to this place... It has to mean something."

It has to have something to do with that awful, fateful mission to Myrkr, but Jaina has no idea what. She tries to sound teasing as she says, "It must have been a loud call, if it brought you back to me again."

"I was just about done anyway," Jacen says easily. "I was getting kind of bored with Akanah."

"Akanah?" Jaina repeats. "That woman who led Uncle Luke on a wild bantha chase?"

"The very same."

"Did she lead you on a chase too?"

"No. She tried to teach me. She said I was her second-worst student."

Jaina snorts amusement. "Well, there's a reason Uncle Luke's still in charge."

"Of course," Jacen grins, though his eyes are serious. A silent moment passes. Behind them, somebody drops a hydrospanner. It clatters on the deck and Lowbacca howls annoyance.

"It's good to see everyone again though," Jaina says. "I wish Tenel Ka were here. Don't you?"

"I do," Jacen admits, and seems to flush a little with embarrassment. Same old Jacen, she thinks. Too busy trying to save the universe and master the Force to go for the woman right in front of him.

Of course, Jaina's love life hasn't been anything to write home about lately either.

"So," Jaina asks, "Do you think you're done? Or do you think you're going to go wandering once this is over?" She hopes, very much, that he'll stay.

"That depends on what we find out there," Jacen says. "I've got this... feeling. Like everything I've been wandering around, trying to find, is about to come and find me."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Who can say? We'll just have to find out." Something very grim, very serious passes over his face.

"What is it?" Jaina asks.

"Nothing," he says, too quickly.

Jaina frowns. It's not like him to keep secrets. He's been open with her, always, even when she'd turned into an emotional shut-in during the late stages of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Everything flowed freely through that twin bond of theirs, but now... It feels like he's holding something back, and to her own surprise Jaina feels hurt.

Something tells her she's not going to be able to pry it out of him, not now. Not when they're about to go on a mission. Later, hopefully, they can talk honestly. She reaches out and rests a hand on his forearm.

"Hey Jacen," she says, "When this is all over, I want to sit down and hear all about your trip."

"There's not much to tell," he says.

"Oh, come on. You were gone for five years. You've spent time with races and orders Uncle Luke probably hasn't even heard of yet. You must have learned something important."

His eyes go cold and distant again, like they're staring through her into the void beyond. Then they snap back, focus on her face. He smiles an odd, aloof smile and says, "Somebody said the point of travel is coming back to the place you started and seeing it with new eyes."

"So, is that's what's happened? You're seeing all of us with... new eyes?"

"Maybe," Jacen shrugs and looks back at the X-wings, at their Jedi friends all together again. "I have a feeling we're about to find out."

He says it with a certain finality. He turns toward his X-wing and starts to walk, slowly, with purpose. Jaina falls in at his side and says, "Well, whatever happens, let me know. We'll face this together."

"Yes," Jacen says, not looking at her. "I'm sure we will."

Chapter 13

The three vanes of Zonama Sekot's engines stabbed upward at the endless, sky-spanning blur of hyperspace. Brilliant blue energy swirled upward from the miles-deep engine wells, spiralling around the round smooth bodies of the vanes before shooting freely outward, propelling the entire world across the stars.

Jaina Solo stood knee-deep in tall grass, maybe half a kilometer away from the engines. They'd had just enough warning time to evacuate people that far from the wells. When the power had flared up from Zonama's bowels, She'd had no idea whether they were safe from whatever massive energies were being unleashed. She had no idea what effect the stress of a hyperspace jump would have on the planet's surface. When the light came she was fully expecting to die; burned to a crisp, or ripped apart by sound-breaking winds, or crunched by buckling of the earth.

Instead it was quiet. Quiet and terrifying.

She at least expected there to be a sound. Sublight engines were *loud*, and came in all sorts of unique flavors, from the thick drone of the *Falcon* to the trademark banshee-wail of a TIE Fighter. The thing about hyperdrive engines was, you never heard them. You never got a chance, because nobody was ever outside of a ship when it was in hyperspace. At least, nobody who lived to tell about it.

So what she got wasn't a drone or a banshee wail. The engines didn't make a sound at all, except for the low rumble of the earth beneath her feet. There was no wind either, and that

was strange. Kilometer after kilometer of high grass just stood, straight up, every blade pointing toward the spectral vision overhead.

The stunning thing was the light. The blue-white energy pouring out of the planet was so bright you couldn't look at the energy-wrapped vanes directly. Every figure standing in the field cast a pure-black shadow that cut like a knife through the blue-white grass. There were dozens of them, all survivors of the failed Yuuzhan Vong raid on the engines. All they could do was stand, stare, and wait for whatever happened next.

"Now... I really *have* seen everything," said the old man dying at her feet.

Jaina looked down at Gotab. He was lying on his back on the stretched they'd hastily put him on, staring at the shifting lights in the sky. It was amazing he'd survived being moved. Bandages were slapped over his abdomen but blood still trickled down the sides of his mouth. His injuries were too deep, and Jaina knew there was nothing she could do for him.

She bent down on her knees, joining the others watching over him. Venku, head down and hidden in black shadow, clutched Gotab's right hand. The old clone Mereel held his left. The blue-white of the engine-light cut his face at an oblique angle, forming black daggers of shadow on his face that highlighted every scar, every wrinkle, every line from his long and dramatic life.

Bess and Jendri, no older than Jaina, sat on their haunches a step away, watching the old man die with silent respect.

As Jaina settled down next to Venku, Gotab's gray eyes flicked away from the sky and caught hers. His mouth moved to speak words, but they came out as wheezes.

She laid a hand on his armored chest. "What is it?"

"So... So..." He rasped, coughed blood. "So much... So much I never... knew..."

Jaina glanced up at the swirling sky. "Surprises never end, do they?"

"It's.... beautiful."

"Yeah," she had to admit. "Kind of spooky too."

"No," Gotab coughed. Venku and Mereel squeezed his hands tighter. "All of it... beautiful... I... Thank you..."

Jaina felt a tear in her eye. "Don't thank me. I dragged you to this planet."

"He did it to save *Kad'ika*," Mereel said. "Don't blame yourself. It was his choice. Don't take that away from him."

Gotab's eyes flicked to Venku's face, still black with shadow. "*Kad'ika*, I... Sorry... Wish I had..."

"Don't." Venku sounded like he'd been crying. "You were my *buir*, *Bard'ika*. I owe you everything."

"Wish... shown you this."

"This is just a planet."

"No... This... so much... So much life..."

His head tilted back and rolled slightly to one side. His eyelids shuddered and slowly closed. His chest stopped moving. She felt him fade into the Force, without bitterness, with some regret.

Then there was a bright flash, brighter than anything before. Jaina and Mereel covered their eyes but Venku just hung his head lower.

Then, when the flash died down, they looked up and stars again, spread across a night sky. The brilliant blue-white from the engines shuddered and vanished completely, leaving them in the black field with only faint starlight as their guide.

One by one, people fumbled for glowrods and turned them on. Bess activated a torch on her armor and spilled a narrow beam of electric-yellow light over grass that was starting to sway with new breeze.

Then she swung it around and gasped.

All eyes went to the bier where Gotab had been laid down. The canvas was there, and his armor, but that was all.

"*Fierfek!*" Mereel gaped. "It's true!"

"What happened?" Jendri was confused. "Where did *Bard'ika* go?"

"He faded into the Force," Jaina said softly, staring at the empty Mandalorian armor.

"*Shabla* incredible," Mereel said. "I didn't believe they could really *do* that. He wasn't even a... I mean..."

"I don't know how it works," Jaina said. "I think it means he was... one with the Force when he died."

"I thought it was just stories, though," Mereel couldn't control his shock, "I mean, when... when Etain died, she left a body."

"I don't know how it works." Jaina glanced at Venku. The man's head was still bowed. He hadn't looked at the stars yet, or the armor his *buir* had left behind.

Jaina gently laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." He picked up his head at last. Two thin trails gleamed faintly on his cheeks. "I'm all right."

Silence lingered over the group. In the distance she heard a low moan from Huhunna, Wraith Squadron's wounded Wookiee, then heard Sharr Latt say something in response.

"Clever *di'kut*. He left the most important thing," Mereel said finally. He patted Gotab's chest-plate affectionately. He told Jaina, "Bodies don't matter to *Mandos*. His soul, that's with *Manda'yaim*, or the Force or whatever. Maybe both. But this armor, that was him. That's what we remember him by."

"I'm sure he'd want you to take care of it," Jaina said truthfully, but she knew that wasn't the whole of it. In the end, Bardan Jusik had been more than just his armor.

The group waited a good hour before approaching the hyperdrive engines again. It took that long for the shafts to cool down, and for a pair of sensor droids to confirm that there was no residual harmful radiation. They also called back the shuttles that had been scuttled when the Vong attacked.

As the shuttles started unloading people and supplies, Jaina and Sharr Latt went into the command station to see if communications and astro-navigation still worked. The first thing Sharr did was try and figure out where they were. The computers in the command station had an impressive series of star-charts, and while Jaina wrestled with the communications system, Sharr was wrestling with the astronomic computer and attempting to get a survey of their current position in space.

"Well, there is *some* good news," he said, hunched over the navigation computer while Jaina was on her butt, peering into the tangled bowels of the communications console and trying to make sense of it.

"Such as?" Jaina scooted out and got her head clear. The comm console, for some reason, simply wouldn't switch on,

and she was hoping it was just a single busted fuse or tripped breaker.

"Looks like we are in orbit around a medium-sized star. Enough to keep us warm. Three planets and an asteroid belt in the system. Nothing that looks life-supporting though."

"Where are we, though?"

"I don't know." Sharr bit his lip. "We're trying to match the constellations in the sky with our star charts, but we haven't gotten a match so far."

"We can't be *that* far from our old location. We weren't in hyperspace that long." Jaina glanced at the tangled wires in her hand and spotted a burnt-out junction between three cables.

"I need a three-piece breaker," she said. "Got any on hand?"

"I don't know. I haven't spent much time here." Sharr looked around the cramped command station. Every wall and corner was covered in consoles, closets, and shelves.

"Can you *look*?" Jaina said tersely.

"As you say, Great One," Sharr went over to the nearest supply closet and began searching. Jaina turned her attention to the console's innards again and checked for any more burnt-out parts. She hadn't found any when Sharr appeared before her, bent on one knee, holding a small three-piece breaker with both hands like a holy offering.

"Har, har," Jaina grabbed it.

Sharr got back up and dusted his knee off. "Well, it's nice to see your sense of humor hasn't improved."

Jaina didn't bother to argue. She had more important thing to do than play along with jokes. One friend had just died, and she had no idea where the others were. She didn't even know where *she* was, physically or emotionally.

Once she switched out the breaker she shoved the console's wiring back inside and tried to turn it on again. This time it lit up and began its comforting mechanical hum.

"Well?" Sharr leaned over her shoulder. "What've we got?"

Jaina tried to contact the long-range beacon first, since they'd need it to call Jag- assuming Trinity Fleet had survived Zonama Sekot's sudden jump to hyperspace. Jaina hadn't felt Jag die- and she knew, deep in her gut, that she *would*, even if

he wasn't Force-sensitive like her. A red error message ran across the screen and she shook her head.

"Okay, just try local communications," Sharr said.

"Okay, let me call the village. See if Danni, Ben, or Tahiri are there." She held her breath as she tried to patch in on the local communications network. If *everything* was down, it could take a long time to restore communications between the stations and villages scattered across the planet. To her relief, the image of a blue-faced Ferroan appeared on the screen.

"This is Jaina Solo from the engine station," she said. "Is Danni Quee there? Or Ben Skywalker?"

The surprise on the Ferroan's face was visible even though the flat, static-blurred screen. She said, "Give me a few minutes, Master Solo."

The Ferroan ducked away, leaving a screen empty except for the dim back wall of the small daumutek used as a comm station.

"*Master Solo?*" Sharr purred. "My my, that sounds dominant, doesn't it?"

"Not compared to Uncle Luke. When we get back home you should try flirting with the *Grand Master*."

Sharr made a face, but before he could retort a familiar woman appeared on the screen.

"Tahiri!" Jaina said. The blonde woman looked pale and tired, and Jaina wondered what ordeal she'd been through.

"Hello, Jaina." Her voice was grim. "Are you all right?"

"Most of us, yes. The Yuuzhan Vong attacked, but we were able to repel them, and get a safe distance from the engines before they fired."

"Casualties?"

"Some," she admitted. She thought about mentioning Gotab, but she didn't think Tahiri had ever met him. Besides, the woman looked like she had something she wanted to say, probably bad news to deliver, so Jaina braced herself and asked, "What's wrong, Tahiri?"

"It's Ben," she said. "Vestara kidnapped him."

"*Vestara!*" Jaina gaped. She felt a spike of anger and regret. She should have killed the Sith witch on Yavin while she had the chance.

"She got away with him in Ship. They took off right before the planet jumped to hyperspace, so we're not sure what happened to them. Jaina, I didn't *feel* Ben die in the Force... I like to think I would have."

"I didn't feel anything either," Jaina said, and tried to take some hope from it.

"But we still don't know if he's here, or in space somewhere... And do we know where *here* is? Our astronavigation computer isn't working right."

"Neither is ours. What about the beacon? Can we send a signal to the fleet?"

Tahiri shook her head. "We already sent crews out. It was damaged by seismic activity during the jump to hyperspace, but we're hoping to repair it. In the meantime, we have to find Ben."

"*If* we can find him," Jaina said grimly. "We don't even know if he's on this planet."

"I know. We may just have to trust the Force," Tahiri said. She looked like she wanted to say more, but held back.

"Tahiri, what is it?"

The woman took a breath and said, "Jaina, I wasn't in the village when Ben was attacked. I couldn't do anything."

"I never blamed you, Tahiri."

"It's not that. It's... I was on another mission, up in the mountains. The *why* isn't important. We got attacked by some Yuuzhan Vong warriors and a Sith. The Yuuzhan Vong... got what they came for, but I killed the Sith."

What did one say to something like that? Congratulations? "I'm glad you're safe, Tahiri."

"I'm took some hits, but I'm okay," she nodded. "But Jaina... When I was fighting him, when he had me cornered and I was ready to give up... I heard something, just for a moment. He touched me Jaina. *Anakin* touched me."

Jaina shuddered. Mara coming back, that made sense, sort of. Mara Jade had been here, met Sekot, and maybe forged a link with it through the Force. But Anakin had never been to Sekot, never even *heard* of it. She didn't want to think Tahiri might be hallucinating, but she couldn't deny that her friend had proven emotionally fragile in the past.

"What was it like?" she asked cautiously. "Was it like what happened with Ben?"

She shook her head. "No. I just... heard him. And, just for a moment... he touched me through the Force. I *know* it was him, Jaina. I *remember* how he felt. I've clung to it all my life and... I'm *sure* of it, Jaina."

She saw the look of gratefulness and awe on Tahiri's face. She didn't look manic or delusional. She looked tired, concerned, worried... but also calm in some deep way Jaina hadn't seen in a long, long time.

"I'm glad," she said honestly.

And yet, in the back of her mind, she was worried too. Ben had spoken with his mother, Tahiri had been touched by the man she'd loved and lost. What was in store for Jaina, then?

There could be only one answer. The thought of it filled her with dread.

After talking with Tahiri she talked to Danni, and got a further summary of events across Zonama Sekot. The jump to hyperspace had caused minor damage in many locations, and some injuries, but so far no one reported loss of life. Ben was still a mystery, and Danni promised to send queries about him to all the other settlements, but Jaina wasn't confident. The inhabited areas of Zonama Sekot covered just a small fraction of the world's total land area.

Danni also mentioned her brief encounter with Sekot, only instead of sounding relieved to talk to the living planet again, she'd been more worried than before. Sekot had appeared as a younger version of Tahiri, but this time it had been *more* than just an image. It had possessed *matter*, with weight and strength of its own, like a real living body. Even Harrar had been able to see Sekot, meaning it was far more than the usual Force-mirage.

All in all, the conversation gave her a lot to think about.

After that she stepped into the night. A dim glow hung in the eastern sky, but true dawn was probably an hour off. Still, there was enough light for her to wander off into the grass. The wind was blowing hard now, and she tied up her hair to keep it from being thrown in every direction. She walked for a while away

from the command station and landing pad, though the sleek three vanes still towered at her back.

Thick clouds had mustered to the north, blocking out the sun. She saw flashes of light within the billowing vapors, felt wind blowing in her face, and wondered how long until the storm hit. She wondered how long the weather would be disrupted after the hyperspace jump, and bad it would be. She hoped there was enough space to shelter people in the command bunker and the shuttles, but she wasn't sure.

She knew the *Mandos* had been out here already. They'd probably placed Gotab's armor in the ground, save some piece Venku took for himself, to add to his eclectic wear. It seemed morbid to her, wearing around the remains of your loved ones at all times, but at least it was honest. Jaina wore a cloak of ghosts too, far too many for less than half a lifetime. She just tried to pretend she didn't whenever possible.

Then a voice behind her said: "If you look away from a wound, pretend it isn't there, does it really go away?"

Jaina turned, slowly. "I was wondering if you'd show up."

There was a man standing in the field just a meter behind her. It wasn't anyone she recognized. A little younger than her, he wore a pale tunic, and had brown hair chopped short. He had a flat, expressive face. Even in the dark there was something piercing and sad in his eyes.

But it wasn't a man. It was Sekot... in some form or another.

She watched the man carefully. The short strands of hair on his head blew with the wind. Clothes rustled around his body.

"Do you know where Ben is?" she asked the first thing on her mind. "He was kidnapped by a Sith, just before you jumped to hyperspace. We don't know if they got away, or if they crashed, or anything. I don't *feel* he's dead, but-

"I'm not sure." the man's head shook.

"I thought you could... I don't know, feel where everything is on you at all times?"

The face looked thoughtful. "Tell me, Jaina, could you feel a single mite crawling on your skin, if you already had thousands more on you at all times?"

She frowned at the callous comparison, but at the same time she recognized his point. She couldn't let herself forget how

vast, strange, and *alien* Sekot really was, even when it dressed up in a human's face.

"Can you try and sense him, please?" she asked.

"I can, and I will, but my... senses are stronger in some parts of me than others. If their ship crashed in the ocean, for example, it will be harder to notice than if they crashed in a forest, disrupting life there."

It made sense, but she'd been hoping for an easy way to find her cousin and was very disappointed.

Apparently the disappointment showed. Sekot said apologetically, "As I said, I'll try, though I do have other things I'm working on now."

Jaina stared at that face, arranged in a similitude of human compassion. She was struck again by the way the wind played with its short brown hair, like they were really, actually *there* to be buffeted.

"Can I touch you?" Jaina asked. "Are you a body? Or are you just getting better at projecting images?"

"A little of both." The man extended a hand for shaking. "Touch, please."

Jaina didn't hesitate. She reached out and squeezed his hand. It felt a little rough, firm but pliant, warmed by an inner heat. It felt like a real human, but when she tried to sense a man in front of her she only felt the same vague richness of Force energy she did everywhere in this world.

She withdrew her hand, intrigued and a little frightened. "How do you do that?"

"I have been experimenting for a long time. Initially I wanted a way to appear to the Yuuzhan Vong directly, instead of using Jabitha or Danni as intermediaries. They revere me as a god, you know, which is strange. I wanted to... them, personally."

Something seemed different about Sekot now. When she'd talked to it before, it had projected a serene confidence, which was perhaps to be expected from a being with Force powers so beyond hers. Perhaps it was that face, with its sad eyes, but Sekot seemed... unsure, somehow. Troubled.

"How?" she pressed. "How can you just... materialize like that?"

"The Force is not just invisible energy," he reminded her. "You can use it to push, pull, support, or interact with matter in many ways. And matter *itself* is the Force. The body of your friend just faded into the Force. Sometimes things can fade back."

Jaina hugged herself. "I know you summoned Mara's ghost. And Tahiri says she... *felt* Anakin, somehow. What about Gotab? Bardan Jusik, whatever you want to call him. Could you... bring him here, if I asked you to?"

The man's face looked pensive, like he hadn't thought about it yet. "Maybe. A spirit can only come if it *wants* to come. My abilities only go so far."

For some reason, that made her feel relieved. She didn't ask about Jacen, though. She couldn't bear to hear his answer.

Sekot said, "You never answered my first question. If something hurts, and you pretend it doesn't, does it stop hurting, or are you just making yourself numb inside?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The man looked disappointed. "Of course you do, Jaina."

She scowled. "Is that what you can do? Can you go prying into people's minds?"

"I don't have to. I know the pain you've gone through. Tahiri told me everything."

Jaina didn't get mad at the other woman. She felt, instead, relief that she hadn't had to lay down the awful story itself.

"I'm asking you because the question is relevant to me as well," the man tapped a finger on his chest. "Do you know what happened, while you were defending my engines?"

"No," Jaina shook her head. "I'm sorry. We were... busy."

"Of course," the man's face smiled sadly. "You see, after the Yuuzhan Vong ships came, another fleet followed. The fleet that was, apparently, searching the stars in the hope of destroying me."

"True Victory?" Jaina felt a spike of fear for Jagged again. The True Victory fleet was far stronger than Trinity Fleet in its current condition. She found herself doubting whether she really *would* feel his death in the Force.

"They were ravaging my defenders," Sekot said sadly. "Once they destroyed your friends, they would have surrounded me

and rained laserfire down, scorching my surface, killing the beings I have sworn to protect.”

A hard look came on the man's face. “So I reached out with the Force. Energy and matter, Jaina. I smashed their fleet to bits. And then I ran, because I was ashamed of what I'd just done.”

Well, Jaina thought dumbly, that explained the light in the sky.

The man's expression grew hard, “But now I think back, Jaina, and I am not sorry. They killed my friends and threatened to slaughter my children. They were like animals so I slaughtered them like animals. By the thousands. Tell me, Jaina, is this the Dark Side?”

Jaina stared at the man's face, so rent with its own confusion and anguish. She'd had no idea the living world could have such *human* emotions, and be torn by such a mortal dilemma.

“I don't know,” she said. How could she judge a whole world? “When you struck them, was it in... anger?”

“No,” Sekot said. “I felt... cold. Determined. I had to protect those I cared about and was willing to destroy whoever stood in my way.”

Ruthless, cold determination. It sounded so much like Jacen. As he'd fallen slowly, inexorably to the dark he'd rarely being driven by anger; he was old and mature enough to control his own emotions. Rather, he'd let the dark enter willingly, bit by bit, because he'd *wanted* it to. He thought he could *use* the Dark Side for noble ends, but in the end the Dark Side had used him, and destroyed him, and left the rigid evil husk of Darth Caedus behind.

And yet she owed the planet her life, the life of her friends, probably her husband's life as well. How could she condemn a being and be in its debt at the same time?

The man was still staring at her, quiet pleading on his face. She felt something tickle her cheek; the first sprinkle of rain. Lightning flashed in the north, and thunder rolled across the wind-swept plain.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I... I don't know.”

“I understand,” the planet said, but sounded disappointed. “It is... a difficult problem, for which there are no easy solutions.”

“That's life,” she said softly, as thunder rolled again.

The man nodded. "Perhaps I can consult someone more knowledgeable soon."

Jaina stiffened in shock and fear, even as the wind blew harder. She knew what he meant, and it *knew* she knew, but as she stared at that sad stranger's face she had to say it, name it, the source of her pain, the wound she tried to look away from but wouldn't heal: "Jacen."

The man's head nodded. "He and I were close once. And I can feel him in the Force, still. Restless, confused, striving. Still very alive, even in death."

"You *can't* bring Jacen back. He's a..." A what? A Sith Lord? Ben and Uncle Luke said they had confronted Jacen's ghost in the Lake of Apparitions in the Maw. They said he was no longer Sith, but still twisted with bitterness and spite. She'd been glad she hadn't been there herself.

"The Force tells me something, Jaina," Sekot said. "It tells me a dragon is coming."

"A dragon?" she frowned. "What dragon?"

"There are Sith in league with the True Honor fleet. They have helped corrupt my children and use them to their own ends. And they will be coming, soon."

"And you think... Jacen can help us defeat them? Jacen's *dead*. He's a ghost, stuck in... I don't know where. But he's *gone*."

"Is he?" the man held up his hand. "And what is this?"

Jaina stared, dumbstruck, speechless at what she thought he was implying.

"Jacen and I were very close once. Closer than I've been to any mortal being, I think. I can sense him now. Even in death he is unique, restless and powerful. If he's willing, I believe I can do more than just summon his *spirit*."

It was incredible. It was impossible. It was horrible. "You can... *bring Jacen back to life*?"

The man shook his head. "Jacen died. That cannot be undone. However, I *do* think I might be able to... give strength and form to his spirit for a time, as I have to this vision you're seeing now."

She had no idea what to say. No idea what to think.

“Please consider this,” the planet said. “I need to consider it myself. In truth, I am not even sure it will work. But, I believe it is worth the attempt. The Force is telling me that we will have need him of in the battle to come.”

Thunder cracked louder than ever before. Jaina looked at the stormclouds to the north. They were almost on her now. Lightning flashed and rain sprayed her face on the wind. She looked to the space where the man had been, but he was gone.

She sprinted to shelter before the thunderstorm came, pounding the bunker and landing pad and grassy fields with hail and spears of rain. There was nothing to save her from the storm inside.

Chapter 14

Wynssa Fel felt very different than the last time she'd stepped foot on *Starless*. To be sure, last time she had arrived in a shuttle; this time it was in a Chiss clawcraft. Before she had been captain of *Celestial* and commander of all Chiss Expeditionary Defense Force elements in Trinity Fleet.

Now she didn't know what she was, and that scared her. She'd grown accustomed to certainty over the years. Not-knowing, making things up as they went, was disturbing and frightening. And, she had to admit, a little exciting too.

Maybe she understood her brother a little more.

Once her Clawcraft landed, she was escorted by a pair of blue-uniformed Alliance guards to the conference room beneath the bridge. They were still treating her like a captain, then, and while Jag probably meant well, it felt like a mocking reminder of the vessel she had been entrusted with, only to lose.

The guards let her enter alone. When she stepped into the conference room she saw Jagged and Traest Kre'fey standing on the far side of the room.

"Welcome, Commodore," Jag said with audible warmth and relief.

She flinched from such an open show of affection, all the more because he seemed oblivious to the deep loss she had just experienced. It did not hurt as much as losing Cem, Chak, Davin, or Cherriss, but she could think of nothing else that came closer.

"I'm not a commodore anymore," she said. "I have no ship to command."

"Until Csilla notifies us otherwise, you are still a commodore, and still leader of all CEDF personnel on this mission," Jag said sternly. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, Commander," she acquiesced.

"Good." Jag gestured to the table. "Now let's sit down and talk things over."

Jagged sat down at the head of the table, Kre'fey right next to him. Wynssa hesitated, then took the seat right next to Kre'fey, leaving all three of the bunched at the corner, looking out at an otherwise empty table.

Jag, at least, didn't seem to mind. He slumped back in his chair, a little tiredly, and said, "Now, what news do you have?"

Kre'fey's white fur rippled slightly. "Currently, all command staff and non-essential crew on *Phoenix*, *Lacentra*, *Niathal*, and *Sunbeam* are confined to quarters. We've pulled everybody we can spare from our other ships to act as guards."

Wynssa shook her head. "You can't keep the entire crew under lock. If they want to, they can retake their ships and you'll be down even more people."

"I realize that, which is why I'm going to make a decision quickly," Jag said. Not *we*, she noticed. Maybe he'd end up a strong leader yet. He looked to Kre'fey. "What's the status of *Phoenix* and *Sunbeam*?"

"Heavy structural damage to both," the Bothan said. "However, I think we can get weapons and engines for *Phoenix* back online in less than ten hours."

"And *Sunbeam*?"

"Do we have a full day to spare?"

Jag sighed. "I don't know. I'm hoping, praying, Zonama Sekot survived the jump and we'll get a signal soon. If we do, I want to jump as many ships as possible to its location. So for now, put all manpower into repairing *Phoenix*. Use as much of its own crew as possible."

Kre'fey looked reticent. Jagged pressed, "What is it, Admiral?"

"I'm no admiral." Kre'fey shook his head. "I was just thinking that the people on *Phoenix* are probably very loyal to

Aref'ja. Unless he tells them to help us, we won't be able to trust them. Many of them might even refuse to help."

"Then we'll need his cooperation. Can I count on you for that?"

Jag's eyes locked with Kre'fey's. The Bothan looked evasive, but in the end he nodded. "I shall do my best."

"What about the people on *Sunbeam*?" Wynssa asked.

"Keep them there for now. It's as good a place as any for them to stay until we figure out whether to redistribute her crew or try and fix her."

"What about their captain?"

"Terra Vatrim was seriously injured in the battle. We've transferred her to *Valediction*'s med bay and kept her stable, the same as *Phoenix*'s captain. They're in no condition to do anything soon."

"All right." Wynssa homed in on her main target. "What happens to starfighters, shuttles, and crew from ships that are already gone?"

Jag met his sister's eyes, held them for the first time since she'd come aboard. "What do you think, Commodore?"

"My fighter squadrons will still fly for you. The hangar on *Vindicator* is already over capacity, but we can send a squadron or two to replenish the stock on *Gem* or *Starless*," she said. "We can also help keep guard over the prisoners."

"Excellent," Jag nodded. "As for you, I was hoping you could take command of *Phoenix*."

Her spine stiffened. "Me?"

"She'll need a captain. We're going to let most of her crew come back, but there's no way Aref'ja leaves the brig until this mission is over."

"What about... Mister Kre'fey?" she glanced at the old Bothan.

"I hold no rank," he said. "Many in the Alliance consider me a traitor for siding with my people against Jacen Solo and Cha Niathal. Besides, I am old."

"I am an outsider. I am not familiar with Alliance ships, or crew, or customs. I would be a terrible choice." She crossed her arms and looked squarely at her brother. "*Admiral* Kre'fey, however, is one of the greatest heroes of the last war. If

Aref'ja's followers will accept anyone as their new commander, surely it would be Aref'ja's own mentor."

Jag stared at Wyn, his face a cool calculating mask. Then, to her surprise, a white goofy grin slanted across his face. He glanced at Kre'fey and said, "She makes a damn good argument."

"Too good," Kre'fey conceded reluctantly. "And what do you plan to do, *Commodore Fel*?"

"I want to pilot," she told her brother. "Please. Put me in command of all Chiss fighter wings. If I'm to command your CEDF forces, let me command them."

Jag raised an eyebrow. "Based on which ship?"

"Most of our birds are in *Vindicator*, but I'll go to *Starless*, *Phoenix*, or wherever else you want."

Jag looked thoughtful. "Interesting possibilities. For now, you can return to *Vindicator*. We're going to have to get a complete appraisal of all ships before I can make a final decision."

"Very good," she said, satisfied. "Also, what happened to your attempts to fix the long-range transmitter on *Starless*?"

Jag blinked, like he'd forgotten all about it. He probably had.

"We were going to do repairs," he said finally, "But then the battle started. I'll have to talk to Captain Antilles."

"If you wish," Wynssa said, "I can contact Csilla and ask for reinforcements."

"There's no guarantee we're going to be here in a day, or two, or however long it will take for us to find Zonama Sekot, if they come at all, which they probably won't." he said.

"Quite so," she said softly.

Jagged sighed slightly. "But please, go ahead. One more question, Commodore. What happened to Alpha Red?"

Kre'fey showed no surprise. His violet eyes took on a hard edge as he looked at Wynssa, waiting on her response. Wynssa wondered how many others he'd told.

"I sent our scientists to personally dispose of the Alpha Red samples," she said. "However, they did not survive the flight to *Vindicator*. We believe they were onboard *Celestial* when she self-destructed."

"So you're not certain, then?"

"As near to certain as can be." She said, then added honestly, "We do not have any in our possession. The only sample of the virus still in this fleet is the vial your wife stole from us."

"All right," Jag nodded, satisfied. "I just wanted to hear it from you."

He believed her, then, believed her implicitly. She was surprised by how good that made her feel.

Wynssa got to her feet. "I'll be on my way back to *Vindicator*, unless there's anything else."

Jag remained in his seat. "We'll need to go over the command crew of the surrendered ships and decide who to trust, but that's something Mr. Kre'fey and I will have to decide through interviews. Right now, I want you to go back and send me a complete roster of all the ships and people you still have. And contact Csilla. And give Captain Vernedet my regards."

"Of course," she paused before turning for the door.

Jag sensed her hesitation. "Anything else, Commodore?"

She didn't know what to say. Somewhere along the line, in the ten years since she'd lost Jag, her own emotions had become a stranger to her. She normally thought of her younger self, the one who'd loved to tease Jag and pester Mom and Dad, as a little brat, blissfully ignorant of adulthood hardship. Now, for the first time, she found she envied the girl she'd been. That one would have known what to say.

"Thank you, Jagged," she managed. "Thank you for everything."

If it wasn't for him, her own shame would have condemned her to death with *Celestial*. Now she was confused and hurting, but also alive in a way she hadn't been in a long time.

"You're welcome," Jag said. He didn't say anything more. She knew he understood.

She turned and stepped into the hallway, where two guards escorted her back to her waiting ship.

Locked in her tiny cabin aboard *Phoenix*, which had always seemed like a prison, Miranda Fardreamer had a lot of time to think.

Her first thought, actually, had been about escape. Logically, she knew it was foolish; the habitat decks were now full of foot

soldiers from *Starless* and *Corusca Gem*, making sure all the True Victory believers were locked tight in their cabins until someone could figure out what to do with a whole ship-full of mutineers.

Still, the first thing she'd done was march over to her desk and pull open the small, innocuous drawer where she kept her mementos from her trip to Tatooine, including Ben Skywalker's lightsaber.

The drawer was empty.

She cursed the empty room, angry that they'd seen through her plans, that they'd invaded her privacy, that they'd taken pretty much the only thing on *Phoenix* to which she attached personal value.

It was a Jedi's lightsaber, after all, the kind hard *Mando* warriors stuck on their belts like trophies. She was proud to have taken it, even if everything else on the mission had gone awry.

But since they'd taken her lightsaber, and her other trophy from Tatooine, she simply laid down on her bed and stared at the ceiling for a while.

She had plenty of things to think about, none of them good. When she'd joined True Victory, it had felt like she was being swept up in something greater than herself, but also something *made* for her, something that would provide purpose to a life generally spent with little direction and a lot of grievances. True Victory was dangerous in a lot of ways, but it *meant* something, and that had been its most attractive quality.

Now True Victory was gone, unless you counted Daala's ships, wherever they went. When she'd been forced to stare down the barrels of *Starless's* guns, she'd discovered she hadn't wanted to die after all. Laying here in her cabin she found she had nothing to live for either. Revenge was out. So was the thrill of having a larger cause.

Even if she didn't get locked up in some Alliance prison cell for the next decade, she had no idea what to do with her life. She had no family, no friends, nobody to care if she was gone. In some ways prison might be better than forgiveness; at least there she wouldn't be forced to wander aimlessly among normal beings living normal lives, the kind that had been stolen

from her by the Jedi and the Yuuzhan Vong barely after she was born.

She was ruminating on the pointlessness of it all when the door to her room slid open with a soft hiss. Miranda leaped off the bed, landed at her feet, and stood stiff at attention. She didn't know who she'd been expecting to see, but it certainly wasn't Myri Antilles.

The woman wore a dark green jumpsuit. Her hair, brown streaked pink and silver, was pulled back in a tight, incongruous military bun. Her cool blue eyes took in the room with one sweep, and she said, "Just like mine."

It was, in fact. Minor variations in the furniture, perhaps, but the size and shape of the room was exactly the same as the one Myri had spent over a week locked up in.

"You survived," Miranda said, because it was all she could think of.

During Myri's time of captivity on *Phoenix*, Miranda had been charged by Captain Loro with the job of talking to the prisoner and trying to convince her of the rightness of True Victory's genocidal crusade. That had been a bust; Myri had been too good at heart, too well-raised, to be even tempted by their mad quest. In the end, it looked like the same had been true of Elscol Loro too.

"You survived too," Myri said. "I'm glad. I've already lost a friend today."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Miranda said awkwardly. She'd never been good at empathy. "So now what?"

"Your case is under review."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means that Fel and Kre'fey want to repair *Phoenix* and put her back in action. They've already granted pardons to lots of the technical crew so they can fix the engines and weapon systems. Odds are we're going to need them whenever Daala or the Vong come back. Some have refused on principle, but most want to at least improve their chances of survival."

"Lucky them. I don't have those skills, though."

"You used to be an agent for Aref'ja. You did jobs for him."

"If you mean 'dirty jobs,' then yeah, I did. I killed a man on Tatooine to keep him quiet. I ended up chased down by a

couple of kriffing Jedi. Speaking of which, what happened to the stuff in my desk?"

"You mean the lightsaber?" Myri raised an eyebrow.

"And the other thing. Where are they?"

"Safe."

Miranda sighed. "Is that Jedi prince with you? Skywalker's son? Because that's his lightsaber. I figure he might as well have it back."

"Ben Skywalker was on Zonama Sekot when it jumped away," Myri said. "We're still trying to find out where it went."

"Well, good luck with that. I can't help you there. Or anywhere else. I was useless to Aref'ja in the end too. He just stuck me on the bridge because they needed a warm body to push buttons."

Myri looked at Miranda but said nothing. Her eyes were sad, or worse, pitying. Miranda looked away.

Eventually, Myri asked, "What happened to Captain Loro? I see she isn't on the crew list any more."

Miranda's throat went dry. She swallowed and, without looking up, said, "She's dead."

Myri couldn't have been surprised. With a cold and level voice, she asked, "How did she die?"

Miranda sighed and looked up, holding Myri's eyes. "She was executed by Aref'ja. For helping *you* escape."

Myri blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

"When your escape pod was floating around, we had you pinned down. But Captain Loro told the gunners to fire on *Valor*, Daala's old Clone Wars cruiser. That's how you got away. She couldn't hide what she'd done, so she let Aref'ja execute her."

That was the only way to put it, really. After Myri escaped, Loro hadn't put up any struggle. She'd accepted her punishment and gone in front of the firing squad without a single show of regret. In fact, just as the lasers hit and dropped her to the deck in a crumpled smoking heap, she had *smiled*. Miranda would never forget the slight, satisfied curve on the old woman's lips, underlit by the glow of laser-blasts, not until the day she died.

"She did it for *you*," Miranda said. "She decided, in the end, she'd rather save you than have her revenge."

Myri's face wavered, like it was on verge of melting. Tears ran down either cheek. The woman looked away and held the sleeve of her jumpsuit up to sop the wetness from her face. She didn't just wipe them away; she stood there like that, body turned to the side, face pressed into forearm, chest and back shaking with silent tears.

Miranda had no idea what to say. All she felt, watching Myri Antilles cry in front of her, was how *lucky* Elscol Loro had been. After a long life defined by loss and anger, with nothing to live for but her hate, she'd found something *better*; something worth giving up her life for. Miranda still hoped, deep down, there was something worth *living* for, but in the end Elscol had managed to define a lifetime of pain not with more destruction, but with an act of selfless sacrifice.

Eventually, Myri lowered her arm and turned to face Miranda with red, damp eyes.

"Thank you for telling me," she said.

Miranda nodded. "Listen, I, um... I'd like to help. Do something."

"You mean you want to be released?"

"Yes. But I also want to *do* something besides sit in this cell. Help repair *Phoenix*, anything."

"Would you help crew the ship, even if it means fighting Daala's people to protect Zonama Sekot?"

She had to think about that. She still had no love for the Yuuzhan Vong, but she had no love for Daala either. When she'd joined True Victory, she'd felt intoxicated by the thought of making a major change in the galaxy by exterminating the Vong and forcing changes in the Galactic Alliance. Maybe, somehow, she could force a change this way too, and do something that really mattered with her life.

More likely, she was going to get herself killed. But if she was going to die, she didn't want it to be locked in her quarters. She could at least die on the deck of her ship, like mom and dad.

"I'll do it," she said. "I'd like to help take Daala down, if I can."

Myri nodded. "All right. I can't promise anything, but I'll try and talk to people on your behalf."

"Thank you," Miranda said. "I want to live to see that Jedi prince. I have some things I need to give him."

It wasn't much to live for, but it was a start.

Jagged Fel was pretty good at hiding his anxieties, but so was Syal Antilles, and that meant she could see through him.

The commander of Trinity Fleet stayed impressively busy in the aftermath of the fight. There was, to be sure, a lot of things to be done to repair the damage on *Starless*, salvage wrecked ships, figure out what to do with all the True Victory members, and decide how to crew *Phoenix*. Jagged Fel managed to take charge of it all with daunting focus and efficiency, and for her part Syal tried to manage everything on *Starless* as best she could.

Nonetheless, he was getting tired, and she knew Jagged had been awake for longer than her. After Kre'fey set off on his shuttle to take command of *Phoenix*, Syal tracked down and intercepted her cousin as he hurried from the flight deck to the communications center below the bridge.

As soon as she found him she grabbed his attention by snapping a salute and rattling off a list of status updates. Jagged heard it all and kept nodding but she could tell his attention was starting to slacken.

Finally, she said, "Sir, don't you need some rest?"

Fel took a moment to respond, like he hadn't realized she'd asked him a question. "I'm quite all right, Captain. You should look after yourself and grab some rack time."

"I just took some stims, sir."

"That's no substitute for sleep."

"I realize that. You've been awake for longer, sir, and you should go first. When we find Zonama—"

"I know," he snapped, holding up a hand. "I assure you, Captain, when the battle resumes I will be on top fighting form."

Syal frowned. She knew that obstinacy well. After a moment's hesitation she asked, "Can we talk without rank for a moment, sir?"

She was surprised when a tired smile formed on his face. "All right, Syal. Go ahead."

She swallowed. "We need to set staggered, scheduled breaks. We don't know when Zonama Sekot is going to call us and we can't keep running on stims until it does."

"Yes, I know." He sighed and rubbed his temple.

"When Daala captured you, frankly, I was a mess. I was running on stims and adrenaline and fear the whole time. I thought that everyone's fate depended on me." She laughed softly. "And when I got to you, you'd already freed yourself. And brought Myri back from the dead. I figure odds are even that your wife might come to *our* rescue."

"I don't doubt *Jaina*," Fel said. "She's always made the right decisions, always done what to be done. I just want to make sure we're in good enough shape to give her the extra help she needs in the end."

"Of course."

He rubbed his temple again. "Your sister is all right, isn't she?"

"The Wraiths lost one, but she got through okay. Helped save *your* sister in the end."

"Ah, yes. Of course. Thats right." Fel sighed and closed his eye. It seemed to take great effort to open it again.

"Captain Antilles," he said, "I believe you may have a good point."

"I like to think so, sir."

"All right. Very well. I am going to do one last thing in the comm station, then retire to my quarters."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"However, I will only do this on one condition." He held up a finger. "The moment I roll out of my bunk, you crawl into yours."

Syal smiled. "Stims should be worn off by then, sir."

"I hope so. Thank you for slapping a little sense into me, Captain."

"No slapping involved so far, sir."

"*Talking*, I mean." Fel drew himself up straight. "Get to work, Captain. I'll let you know when you're good for rack time."

"Take whatever you need, sir," she saluted.

"Oh, believe me, Syal, I intend to."

Chapter 15

“Some heroes we are, huh?” Jesmin said with a sigh. She sat on her cot with her back against the wall, both legs splayed out in front of her. She had a series of bacta bandages over her left thigh, and another, thinner bandage wrapped around her neck. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse and rasping thanks to the Sith witch who'd nearly choked the life out of her.

Scut grunted his approval as he lay flat on his own cot, staring up at the smooth curved surface of the clinic's ceiling.

“I figure it's actually a little poetic,” she continued. “I get stabbed in the left leg by a Sith. You get your right one torn up by a Yuuzhan Vong. We'll both be hobbling around like invalids for a while, thanks to mirroring wounds delivered by both halves of our looming enemy...”

“Agh!” Scut shouted as pain stabbed up his leg again. He tried to proper himself up on his elbow so he could look.

“Stay down!” Jesmin and Kodra Val barked in unison, one from his side and the other from around the nova of pain that was his right thigh.

“So *anyway*,” Jesmin went on, “I was able to drag my useless butt over to the comm shed and talk to Sharr a little bit ago. He says *Huhunna* got hurt too, and you know, that made me feel better, because if a big strong Wook like her could get hurt, then a wimpy little Jedi dropout like me put up a good fight. She'll be fine by the way. Drikall patched her up. They'll be on their way back here soon, though. I heard it's the comm system they need to fix now.”

Scut screamed again as pain stabbed up his leg and fanned out through his torso. It was gone as quickly as it came, leaving him panting, wide-eyed and wide-mouthed, staring up at the ceiling and clutching the reed-shoot frame of his cot with both hands.

From the bottom edge of his vision, he saw Kodra Val stand up, the tentacles on her shaper's headdress writhing. She glanced down at him as though she was inspecting a particularly ugly kind of insect and said, "You are far too sensitive to pain."

"Too bad," Scut grunted. "I'm not one of your warriors. I didn't start stabbing myself since the age of five."

Kodra Val wiped her long-fingered hands on the apron of her woven dress. "Well, perhaps you will get used to it. I am done, for now."

"Wonderful," Scut said. "Can't wait to see your beautiful handiwork."

With more grunts and groans, he managed to prop himself up on his elbows and look at what she'd done to his leg. The thing she's wrapped around his thigh was the color of mud and had a scaly texture. As he looked at it, it seemed to expand and contract slightly, like it was breathing. He tilted his head, looked at it more, and thought he saw one little mirror-black eye staring back at him.

That was enough to drop him on his back. "What *is* that thing?"

"It is a *mor'lyath*," Kodra Val said, matter-of-fact. "I made sure it was well-fed before attaching it to your wound. Once the food processes through its body, it will start ejecting important proteins and tissue into your system that will greatly accelerate the healing process."

"You're saying..." Scut trailed off, brain struggling to comprehend.

All his life he'd fancied himself a great biologist, a creative inventor who tried to salvage the scientific genius of his people without all the nasty stuff that came with it. As it turned out, he'd been the worst kind of amateur, fumbling through motions learned from somebody else without understanding anything at all.

At least, that was how he felt with the *mor'lyath* wrapped around his leg.

"Oh," he muttered, "Oh *poodoo*..."

"You could put it that way," Jesmin said with a giggle.

"Not funny."

"It will heal you faster than this *bacta* material from your fleet," Kodra Val said. "Our supply ran out not long after we broke contact with the Alliance, and I've been experimenting with *mor'lyath* breeds that would serve the Ferroan population instead of *bacta*... With mixed results. Therefore, I did not think it wise to apply one to your human friend as well."

"Trust me," Jesmin said, "I am *just* fine with *bacta*."

Scut listened to their voices without looking at anything except the ceiling. He didn't want to risk eye contact with that... *thing* on his leg. "How long do I have to keep this thing on?"

"Based on your wounds, perhaps a day," Kodra Val said.

"And then what? Am I going to need a cane or something?"

"Oh no," she said. "You will be totally healed."

"Huh," Jesmin puffed. "Lucky."

"Well, okay." Scut had to be logical. That was a bright side. "I guess I'll just stay like this... not moving... not looking at my leg... for another day."

"You will be lucky to last so long," Kodra Val said. "There are still enemies out there to fight."

"Don't remind me."

He heard the rustle of Kodra Val's headdress as the shaper shook her head. "You would not make a good member of the Warrior Caste, Viull Gorsat."

"I never wanted to be. I like my face the way it is, thank you."

"Not *all* the warriors mutilate themselves now," Kodra Val said. "Particularly those who worship the new god, the Ganner. They place quite a prize on a smooth, symmetric physical appearance."

"Just like the one they worship, how fitting," Tahiri said from the corner of the room.

Scut didn't strain to look in her direction, but he asked, "When did you show up?"

"Just now," she said. He heard her footsteps as they clapped across the clinic's hard floor. "*Oh. You've got a mor'lyath.*"

"He should be healed in a day," Kodra Val said.

"I only had to wear one for a couple hours. But I was a little kid at the time."

For a moment Scut wanted to ask what in the kark she was talking about. Then he remembered that Tahiri Veila was also Riina Kwaad, and she had a whole separate set of memories implanted in her skull by a mad Yuuzhan Vong shaper on Yavin 4. It made his own civilization-straddling childhood look simple in comparison.

"I was just saying that he would make a poor warrior," Kodra Val said. "However, I believe he would make a fine shaper."

"Really?" Scut asked. He hadn't known Kodra Val very long but she didn't seem like the joking kind.

"Oh yes. Your ingenuity is quite impressive, especially considering they you were working within the limitations of the infi- the Alliance."

"Oh. Well, that's great. Um, thank you.

"Not at all. I look forward to seeing what *else* you can do, once you are healed." He felt a hand pat his left calf. "So rest well. I want to see you in *peak* condition."

He heard the swish of skirts and the clacking of feet as she turned and left.

He stared up at the ceiling for a long time. Nobody spoke.

Finally, he asked, "Was she flirting with me?"

Jesmin tried to stifle a laugh, poorly. Tahiri said, "Yuuzhan Vong shapers tend to be women, and they tend to look down on warriors as muscle-brained brutes. So she *was* complimenting you, definitely."

"Well, that's... um... Wow. I'm going to have to think about that for a while."

"Take your time," Jesmin said. "It's not like you're going anywhere else for the next twenty-four hours."

"Hopefully," Tahiri said, her tone more serious.

"What have you heard?" Scut asked.

He heard the other cot creak under additional weight and turned his head carefully to the side. Tahiri sat at Jesmin's feet, shoulders hunched forward.

"A little bit from Jaina," Tahiri said. "She's on her way now. She says she's talked with Sekot."

The planet's living awareness, Scut reminded himself. He'd read the Yuuzhan Vong legends about a single consciousness guiding Yuuzhan'tar, and had studied the biology of the late World Brain that they had installed on Coruscant in their attempt to replicate their homeworld. Still, the scientist in him had a hard time picturing some overriding consciousness emerging in some nebulous fashion out of chaotic nature. If it had happened here, why not other planets?

If there was an answer, it probably lay in the Force, but that was untouchable to him.

"Sekot said the planet was attacked," Tahiri continued. "The fleet called True Victory went after it. They attacked our fleet, and would have beaten them. Then Sekot reached out with the Force and attacked True Victory."

Jesmin frowned. "How does that work exactly?"

"I don't know, but it's done it before. Not in a long time though." Tahiri looked worried. "I guess Sekot tore through most of the True Victory fleet, then jumped away."

Scut wanted to ask about *Starless*, and about their friends up in orbit, but he knew Tahiri had no more answers.

"We're sending crew out to repair the long-range transmitter," Tahiri said. "When they fix it, they'll send out the encrypted beacon signal that should bring Trinity Fleet."

Assuming they're still alive, Scut thought grimly.

Tahiri forced a smile and looked them both over. "You'll both be fine, though. You should be on your feet and back to normal soon. I'm sure we'll need you both."

"Tahiri," Jesmin said, "I'm sorry about Ben. I—"

"I know, you already told me." Tahiri held up one hand. "I know you did the best you could. You tried to stand your ground against a Sith, and an especially nasty one at that. Your mother would be proud."

"Dad would be disappointed I didn't blow her up."

"Well, you can't please everyone," Tahiri shrugged easily and looked at Scut. "You too. You did a great job, trying to tackle those warriors."

"Fat good that did. Qelah Kwaad kidnapped, two dead."

"But the others lived. That's what's important." A frown creased the scars on her forehead. "You can't dwell on your failures too much. That'll eat you up inside. Believe me."

"Heard you bagged yourself a Sith Lord," Jesmin said.

"I don't if that's quite the right term, but yeah, I got him." Tired satisfaction shown on Tahiri's face. "And you know what? When he had me cornered in the woods, I was scared out of my kriffing mind."

Jesmin chuckled, and so did Scut. In truth, it *did* make him feel better to know that Tahiri Veila- famous Jedi, Force-user, whatever- could get scared witless. A glance at Jesmin showed she felt better too.

There was a knock on the door. Scut didn't look in its direction but he saw Tahiri pop to her feet.

"Jaina!" the blond woman said, "That was fast!"

"Strong wind at our backs," a cool female voice responded. "Tahiri, can we speak outside for a minute?"

"Of course," Tahiri glanced at the two Wraiths. "Rest up, you two. I'll see you later."

Scut turned his face back up to the ceiling as Tahiri walked out of the room. A second after she was gone, he heard more footsteps, and the low grumble of a Wookiee. He was pretty sure there was only one Wookiee on Zonama Sekot, and that meant Jaina Solo had brought the other Wraiths back with her.

"Sithspawn, that creature looks *hideous*!" Sharr Latt cried, "Oh, and there's something on its leg!"

"Har, har," Scut said humorlessly.

Huhunna made a low, aggravated groan.

"You holding in there?" Jesmin asked.

The Wookiee grunted affirmative.

"Well, Sharr and I saw our share of action too," Drikall said defensively. "Vong paratroopers, sailing down into hypderdrive engine shafts big enough to ram a Corellian corvette inside... This is one crazy planet."

Sharr's white-haired head appeared on the edge of Scut's vision. He gave the Yuuzhan Vong an appraising look and asked, "Seriously, what *is* that thing?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"I have to say I'm curious, yes."

Drikall's horned head appeared next to him. "I am too. That's an interesting piece of work."

So, in the most clinical, detached, scientific way possible, Scut explained. He at least had the reward of watching Sharr's face contort in a half-dozen different permutations of shock and disgust.

When he was done, both of them looked like they were about to puke.

"Ugh," Sharr said, "Sorry I asked."

Jaina led Tahiri on a slow, meandering walk through the lanes of the village and beyond, into the hills where grass grew high and copses of bora trees shot upward like pillars bristling with colorful leaves. The overhead sky, however, was overcast with gray billowing clouds that seemed to suck all color and life out of the landscape.

First Jaina talked a little more about her encounter with Sekot. She talked about how the planet had taken the form of a man she didn't recognize, and how that man had possessed form and strength, even warmth, like a living being. She talked about how Sekot didn't know where Ben was, but would try and ascertain whether he was still on the planet's surface anywhere.

Finally, she talked about Jacen.

When Jaina was done recounting what Sekot had told her, Tahiri frowned in confusion. "Are you suggesting what I think you are? That Sekot could somehow... bring Jacen *back*?"

"I don't understand either. Like a Force ghost, but... given form the way it does to the images it creates."

"But what does that *mean*? Could Jacen move around, do what he wants? Could he leave the planet? Could he use the Force?"

"I don't know. Sekot says it can't *resurrect* my brother... It can just give him form, for a little while. He says we'll need Jacen's help. He says a dragon is coming."

Tahiri stared out at the hills, the village, and the sprawling gray clouds, and hugged her shoulders tight.

She muttered, "Summon a Sith to fight a Sith. Why would that be a good idea again?"

"Ben and Uncle Luke said he's not a Sith any more... wherever he is."

"But he's no Jedi either."

"No. But I don't know if he ever was."

"You could say the same about me," Tahiri sighed. "The question is... which Jacen would we get? I keep so many versions of him in my memory, you know? Most of the time he's Caedus. He's pale and sulky. His eyes are angry and yellow. He'll do anything to anybody to get what he wants, because he thinks he knows what's best for everybody. He'll play with your emotions, draw out your hopes and fears, and use them to trap you."

"Tahiri," croaked Jaina, "I-"

"And sometimes," she continued, still staring into nothing, "Sometimes I remember the *other* Jacen. I remember him when he was always doubting, always wondering what his place in the Force was. He used to bug the hell out of Anakin, and me too, sometimes.

"And then there's the Jacen toward the end of the war, after he died and came back. He was... strong then. Still not sure of everything, and hurt in all kinds of ways, but a lot of those were ways *I'd* been hurt in. Losing Anakin. Spending too much time with the Yuuzhan Vong and wondering if they'd left a piece of themselves inside you. He was... a really good friend then. For a little while I almost thought I was--"

She stopped, shook her head, as if to banish old memories. Jaina understood, though, and it made her heart ache. Tahiri had spent so many years aching for the young man she'd loved and lost, the man she's seemed destined to be with forever, and the closest thing she had to Anakin was his brother.

But in the end Jacen had manipulated those feelings, turning them against Tahiri herself and the entire Jedi order. And *that* was the man Sekot said they needed, the man it offered to summon.

Weakly, Tahiri asked, "Which Jacen do *you* remember?"

All those and more, she thought. But she said, "I try not to think of Jacen at all."

"I know. But Jaina... he's your *brother*. You can't just pretend he never existed."

"I can try."

"He was half your life."

Exactly, Jaina thought. For the past four years she'd been trying hard to forget half her life. Sometimes she even succeeded.

She blew out a breath. "What would *you* do? If Sekot offered you a chance to summon Jacen, knowing everything we know, what would you do?"

Tahiri stared out at the clouds, contemplating. "I don't think I can forgive Jacen for what he did to me. I hope I never see him again."

"Then we won't summon him."

"You asked my *opinion*," Tahiri looked at her with sad green eyes. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do. The only one who can make that choice is *you*."

"And I agree. What Jacen did... I can't forgive that. Uncle Luke might have been able to forgive Darth Vader, but I... I don't have that in me." She shook her head. "I was never as *nice* as Uncle Luke."

"Okay, then we turn Sekot down," Tahiri sounded disappointed.

It would be easy. Just look Sekot in the eye (or whatever) the next time it deigned to show up and tell it, no thank you, we'll handle the oncoming dragon on our own. But it felt like running away. She didn't want to see Jacen again, didn't want to face the half of her life she'd thrust a lightsaber through four years ago, but she also knew she'd never get another chance.

Cautiously, she asked, "If I *do* summon him... Will you be with me?"

She expected an angry reaction, but Tahiri just nodded with sad eyes. "Whatever you decide, I'll be there for you."

"Thank you so much," Jaina reached out, took Tahiri by the shoulder, and pulled her close. She rested her cheek against Tahiri's blonde hair, nestled her nose in it, so the other woman wouldn't see her tears.

"What are you going to do?" Tahiri asked softly.

"I don't know. But I'm afraid I can't afford *not* to do it."

"There might be other ways to beat the Sith."

"That's not what I meant."

A long, sad pause. "I know."

The Mandalorians, like Jaina and the three Wraiths, had taken the shuttle back to the village. They talked little on the ride there. They'd buried Gotab's armor in the field outside the hyperdrive vanes, and at the time it had felt like a good place to consign *Bard'ika* to an eternity with the *Manda'yaim*. The ceremony had been simple, and had felt like a satisfying farewell at the time, the kind Gotab would have liked. Before doing so, Venku had taken the right forearm plating from Gotab's armor and added it to his own. He also took Gotab's weapon and clipped it to his belt alongside both of his mother's, though what he'd do with three lightsabers he didn't know.

On the ride back to the village, he'd felt curiously empty. He was no stranger to death. He'd felt his mother die in the Force when he was a small child. He'd watched his uncles and brothers die one after another in a lifetime of warfare. That kind of life made you numb to death, especially if you went to lengths to suppress your natural connection with the Force. Gotab was different, though. In his connection with the Force and his love for Venku's mother (though he'd never out and called it such), *Bard'ika* had been the closest thing Venku had to a real father. In the back of his mind, Venku had always expected that when the old ex-Jedi finally kicked it, it would hurt the way death was supposed to, the way his mother's had sixty years ago.

Instead, he felt next to nothing. He knew he should have. He saw the pain on Mereel's weathered, lined old face. He could see it on Bess and Jendri's too, though Ordo's grandkids hadn't been as closely bonded to Gotab as Venku himself.

So, an hour after arriving in the village, Venku left the others behind and went for a walk in the forest.

He knew what he wanted, and was loath to admit it to himself. He wanted to see Gotab again. He wanted to see his *buir* pop up out of thin air and have a chat, just like Mara Skywalker had done with her kid.

He wanted the Force, this strange burden he'd been born with, to be *worth* something for once.

But since he couldn't get that, he wandered around the bora trunks, looking up through layers of colorful leaves at a leaden, dreary sky. At least the scenery fit his mood.

After a while of wandering, he sat down on a fallen log and tried to get his bearings. This cloudy sky gave no hint of the sun's location in the sky, not that that necessarily meant anything with a rogue planet like this. He looked around and tried to determine the path he'd taken, but failed.

He tried to remember the last time he'd gotten himself lost. For some reason, he didn't mind this.

He didn't even have the desire to get found again, so he spent a long time sitting on the log, staring at the trees as they shifted and rustled in the wind. Tentatively he allowed himself to open to the Force, as he had when he'd first woken up on this strange planet. He felt life, yes. So much life. Insects, birds far up in the canopies, little mammals crawling through the under-brush. All manner of life stretching for the sky and fungi growing in the decay of undergrowth. The cycle of birth, striving, death, and renewal. The natural order of things was very *Mando*, or at least so the Mandalorians liked to think. It was part of the reason why they'd never industrialized Mandalore like so many other planets. That, and the fact that they were rarely organized enough to tackle ambitious building projects. Growing up, the valleys and forests outside Kyrimorut had been a constant reminder to young *Kad'ika* of that harsh, immortal order of things. Maybe that's why he didn't feel stranded here in the wilderness, even though he was lost.

He was allowing himself to sink to the subtle motions of life when he felt a presence in the Force, far stronger than any bird or tree. Lifelong warrior instincts kicked in and he rose to his feet. He had a blaster on one hip and three lightsabers clanking off the other, and his hand went for the latter.

But he recognized that sensation in the Force. Powerful, determined, tired, and sad. It was Jaina Solo.

She appeared in the distance, walking slowly in his direction, weaving in and out of the tree-trunks. He took his hand off Gotab's lightsaber, sat back down on the log, and waited for her to come.

When she got close, he said, "Were you able to track me?"

"I asked Mereel where you went, actually," she said casually as she walked up to his log.

"I wandered a lot. Got lost. How'd you find me?"

"I felt you in the Force," she admitted. "May I sit?"

"Who's stopping you?"

"Good *Mando* answer," Jaina said, and sat down next to him. They looked out at the forest, neither speaking. It was very still and very quiet except for the faint rustle of leaves overhead.

Venku's felt impatient, and a little angry at being robbed of his peaceful solitude. He asked, "What'd you haul all the way out here for?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"So talk."

She glanced at him, like she was disappointed somehow. Then she asked, "How is everyone holding up?"

"We're *Mandos*. We've buried plenty of brothers before."

"Don't give me the tough-warrior-guy act. You're not Fett. How are *you* holding up?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "He was an old man. This was going to happen sooner or later, especially if he kept on going on missions with us."

"He could have stayed on Mandalore," she observed. "He didn't have Fett blood. The nanovirus didn't effect him."

"Everyone he cared about did. We're about family, you know that, and *aliit* is a lot more than blood. Of course he was going to come with us."

"You're right," she said. "Family *is* more than blood. But blood's still part of it."

It wasn't for Venku. His mother and father both died when he was a child. He hadn't loved Ordo, Mereel, Fi, or the others because they came from the same *aiwha-bait* vat as Darman. He'd loved them because they raised him, taught him, and made him into a man.

And because, with no blood-family left, they were the only thing he had. Sometimes he thought his crusade to unite the entire Mandalorian nation sprung from the fact that he had to create whatever family he could get.

Jaina continued, "I need to make a choice. A hard one. A long time ago I talked with you and Gotab on Mandalore."

"I remember." The sunset had been glorious, the conversation sad.

"That talk helped me do what I had to do. I had to... kill my brother," Jaina said with difficulty. "Now I might have to do something else."

"And what's that?"

"I might have to bring him back."

He stared at her, trying to understand. Did she mean bring back his Force-ghost? He was a little surprised that hadn't happened already. As he understood it, little Jacen Solo had spent a lot of time on this planet before going bat-*osik* crazy, and Sekot could probably summon his blue ghost with ease.

Still, he didn't envy Jaina the conversation. He hoped to talk with Gotab, and all his life he'd nursed a secret desire to talk to his Jedi mother's ghost, especially when he was young. At the same time, he'd never wanted to talk to his father, who'd not only died but killed brothers for his son's sake. Even now, it was too hard to really face. He was thankful that Darman had been a plain, powerless normal.

"What would be the point?" he asked. "Aside from hurting yourself."

"It's not just about *Jacen*," she insisted. "Sekot insists he can help us fight the Sith that are out there."

More Sith. It figured. At least this time the Force-users were swinging their blades around in the Unknown Regions, where they wouldn't knock over any civilizations. He knew better than to say that to Jaina, though; she clearly wasn't in the mood. And, he admitted, the three metal cylinders weighing down his belt made him a little more amenable to saber-jocks than usual.

That, and the craving he had to talk to Gotab, just once more.

"I love him," Jaina said softly. "Still. And I hate him, for what he did to Mara, Ben, Tahiri and so many other people."

And you, Venku thought, but Jaina Solo wasn't so selfish as to wallow exclusively in her pain, though she easily could have.

"What can he really *do*?" Venku asked. "Just show up all blue and hazy, give some cryptic advice if he's in the mood?"

"Not just that," Jaina shook her head. "Sekot can... give form to him. So it says."

Now he was alarmed. "Give form? What does that mean?"

"It means give him a body."

"Bring him back to life?"

"That's not what Sekot says. It just means... I guess... bring him back for a little while."

Fierfek. And he thought Sekot had been crazy before. Now this living planet could apparently bring people back from the dead? The possibilities and consequences were staggering. He stretched out with the Force, felt the forest around him, in many ways so like the forests on Mandalore. It beggared his mind that a world so similar to what he'd known could also possess such mind-bending power.

"Do you want advice?" he asked. "Because this sounds way out of my league."

Jaina laughed bitterly. "Yeah. Mine too."

"If you bring him back... what's he going to be? It doesn't make sense to bring a Sith Lord back to fight *more* Sith."

"I know. Believe me, I know. But I think... it's different. Jacen was never *really* a Sith, just like he was never *really* a Jedi. He was only Jacen, whatever that meant at the time."

She sighed and pulled the lightsaber off her belt. Still sitting, she pressed the trigger and a violet blade hummed to life in front of her.

"They call me the Sword of the Jedi; did you know that?"

"I did." She'd certainly earned it.

"Swords cut. They stab. They rend. They bring justice and slay dragons. I've done all those things, and you know what? Swords don't heal. They can't. They just keep tearing holes."

Empathy was a strange thing for Venku. A warrior's life had burned most of it out of him. He cared about his clan, and the Mandalorians both individually and as a race, but he'd made a point not to care for others outside that clan, *especially* Jedi. Gotab and *Kal'ba'buir's* bitterness had been burned into him from a young age, and for the first time he was starting to regret that.

Right now, his heart was aching for Jaina Solo.

"I recognize that saber," he said. "That's the one you trained with on Mandalore."

"I used it to kill my brother," she said stiffly.

He'd thought as much. It was a grim thing to hold onto a constant reminder of your sins, but he'd seen it before.

"After Niner slotted Darman," he said, "*Bard'ika* wiped his memory. It was hard for him. Niner was his brother but he did it because it was the only way Niner could live with himself. *Bard'ika* told himself he was being merciful, but he never decided if he'd done the right thing.

"I think a part of Niner still remembered, though. He kept the gun. He didn't carry it around with him all the time, but he kept it in a locked drawer. Unloaded. I'm not even sure if he knew why, not consciously, but he kept it hidden there. We didn't even know until he passed and we found it in his house."

"He couldn't let it go."

"I can't tell you what to do," Venku sighed. "I don't have any answers. I think... If I had the chance to see my father again, talk to him, fight with him... I wouldn't. Couldn't. I've spent all my life trying not to be what he was in the end."

Jaina nodded and stared at the brilliant violet-white of her sword.

"But," he admitted, "You're a lot braver than I am."

Her saber still burning, Jaina pushed herself off the log and got to her feet. She looked down at Venku, gave her saber a little wave, and asked, "Are in the shape to spar?"

The question took him a little by surprise. His body still felt sluggish, like his brain and muscles weren't completely connected right.

Well, he was still in better shape than most men in his age.

He stood up and pulled Gotab's saber off his belt. Without asking, he tossed it to Jaina, and she caught it easily in her free hand. As she ignited it, he drew both his mother's sabers.

"I'm not used to fighting with two blades," Jaina said.

"You're never too old to learn," Venku said. "Besides, I'm old and broke-down. I could use the handicap."

"Okay," Jaina chuckled lightly, easily. She angled her body slightly forward, her saber pointed flat and forward, Gotab's held diagonally across her chest.

"Show me what you've got," she said.

Swords of light blurred, flashed, and sang through the forest.

Chapter 16

While *Chimaera* did not escape the battle at Zonama Sekot undamaged, her crew nonetheless considered themselves lucky. The destruction the living world wrought on Admiral Aref'ja's fleet had been stunning to behold. Fy'lyor herself had felt her jaw drop open in terror and awe at the sight of giant waves of rainbow light sweeping across empty space, leaving flaming wreckage in their wake. When Daala had given the order to retreat to hyperspace, the entire crew breathed sighs of relief.

Fy'lyor was occupied with damage surveys and repairs for hours afterward. The boarding teams sent to pillage the Chiss vessel had discovered the active self-destruct program, and most of them had been able to evacuate in time. Still, some of the explosion had damaged *Chimaera's* ventral turbolaser batteries and shield projectors, and EV teams were sent out to repairs them.

As had happened after the battle in the nebula, Fy'lyor felt happy to lose herself in her work. It was a tired, true adage that nothing brought a crew together like times of crisis. She felt like she was gaining the trust of *Chimaera's* personnel while she oversaw repairs, and in turn was coming to trust them as well.

She was also glad not to have to deal with Daala. After the battle and hasty retreat, the old Admiral had gone grim and silent with barely concealed anger. The anger of Natasi Daala

was the stuff of legend, and Fy'lyor did not want to be in her vicinity when the dam burst.

Of course, it had to happen eventually. After some twelve hours of directing repairs, Fy'lyor was summoned to Daala's private ready-room. The gunnery section chief, wearing a concerned expression, had wished her good luck. It made her feel a little better, but only a little.

When she stepped into Daala's ready-room, she was surprised to find the woman standing at the counter in the far corner of the chamber, pouring a glass of amber-colored wine into a pair of slim glasses.

"Good day, Admiral," Fy'lyor remained by the door with a military-straight posture, hands clasped behind her back.

Daala said, "Good evening, actually. At least based on the ship's internal chronos."

"Ah, I'm sorry. Good evening then."

"Come, come," Daala waved Fy'lyor over to her side of the room. Fy'lyor walked forward and tried not to show her deep concern. Sulky Daala, she could handle. Angry Daala, she was expecting. But *happy* Daala? After all that had just happened? She couldn't wrap her mind around that miracle of the universe.

Daala picked up one glass of wine and raised it. "Have a drink, Captain. You've been working very hard and deserve a moment of respite."

"Thank you, Admiral." Fy'lyor picked up the other glass and clinked it lightly against Daala's. Truth be told, she was very tired and one glass of wine would probably put her to sleep, but she wasn't going to tell Daala that.

"Let's sit down," Daala gestured to the sofa. "I want you to tell me about the repairs."

Fy'lyor sat down on one end of the sofa, Daala on the other, leaving the middle cushion empty between them. Taking occasional sips of wine (not too strong, thankfully) she explained the status of repairs on the shield generators and turbolaser batteries. She also gave a thorough accounting of the TIE Fighters and shuttles lost during the battle. Daala listened, nodding and occasionally asking questions, but the woman seemed distracted, like there was something far more important she wanted to get to.

When Fy'lyor wrapped up her briefing, interest lit up in Daala's eyes. They were finally getting to whatever she wanted to talk about. The old woman took one more sip of wine, then put her quarter-full glass down on the low table next to the sofa. She leaned forward a little and said, "Captain Fy'lyor, we have made an important discovery."

Fy'lyor had guessed as much, though she wasn't sure what could warrant the drastic change in the admiral's mood. She asked, "Have you located Zonama Sekot?"

"Not yet, unfortunately. *Resolve* has been sending out probes, though of course any search is a very long shot. However, when we *do* find Zonama Sekot, or the Vong fleet, we will be ready for them."

"How?" Fy'lyor frowned.

"Before being forced to evacuate *Celestial*, our boarding teams made a very interesting discovery. They encountered a biological laboratory on the ship, which contained a heavily-sealed durasteel safe. Naturally, we decided whatever was in there must have been important. Our people managed to load it on the last shuttle off *Celestial*."

Fy'lyor felt disappointed in herself for not keeping better track of the returning boarding parties. She'd been so caught up in repairs an important element of the ship's operation had slipped beneath her concern.

Of course, it was very possible the boarding crew reported directly to Daala, keeping her out of the loop again.

"Have we opened the safe?" she asked, though in this case 'we' clearly meant Daala's special agents, whoever they were.

"We had to cut it open in the end," Daala said. "What we found was a collection of small vials containing identically-composed biological material."

"What kind of material would they need to put in a secure safe?"

"A very good question. However, from the start I had my suspicions. They turned out to be correct." A confident smile spread on her face. "Tell me, Captain, how much do you know about the last battle of the Yuuzhan Vong War?"

Fy'lyor fought a frown. She'd been young when the battle happened, too young to fight, and it hadn't been covered very

extensively at the Academy. It had been a joint operation, mixing Imperial, Alliance, Hapan, Chiss, even Smuggler's Alliance elements. The staff at the Academy had preferred to focus on pure Imperial tactics, using battles by all-Imperial fleets.

Rather than try to hide her ignorance, she admitted, "I'm sorry, Admiral. I haven't studied it closely."

Daala shrugged, like she'd been expecting that response. "Captain, you should at least know that while Imperial and Alliance vessels broke through the Vong defenses on Coruscant, the Hapans and smuggling vessels formed a protective cordon around Zonama Sekot. It was rumored, though officially denied by the participants, that the Yuuzhan Vong forces were able to slip one small ship past the defensive cordon and set it on a direct run for Zonama Sekot. Unlike today, the living world was reticent to attack its enemies. Supposedly, it intercepted this ship with several of its own and flung both out into the oblivion of space."

"I see," Fy'lyor said, though she couldn't see what such a minor incident had to do with their life-and-death struggle now.

"It was also rumored," said Daala, "That this special ship was a late arrival to the fight. Supposedly, it came from Caluula. Caluula is a planet near Mon Calamari that the Yuuzhan Vong were using as an advance base for their assault on the Alliance's temporary capital. However, shortly before *that* assault, the Vong threat on Caluula was neutralized. Quickly, suddenly neutralized."

"How?"

"We don't know," Daala shook her head. "All we know is that, with barely any effort, the Alliance was able to kill every Yuuzhan Vong on the planet. Everything was destroyed *except* for this one escaping ship, which later threw itself at Zonama Sekot."

"I'm sorry, Admiral. I don't understand," Fy'lyor admitted.

"Now *here* is the critical part." Daala leaned closer. "There was another rumor from around that time. The Alliance and the Chiss had co-developed a bio-weapon that killed Yuuzhan Vong life-forms. This virus destroyed every piece of Vong-life it touched, on a molecular level. If that ship from Caluula *was*

infected with the bio-weapon, the Yuuzhan Vong must have thrown it at Zonama Sekot in the hopes the weapon would destroy the living world as well.”

“And you're saying *this* is what we recovered from *Celestial*?”

Daala grinned like a hungry animal. “*Exactly*, Captain. We even tested it on some of the coralskipper debris we salvaged during the last two battles. Within an hour, they were coming apart on a molecular level.”

Fy'lyor fought down a shudder. It sounded like a terrible weapon. Of course, was killing them with a bio-weapon any better or worse than killing them with turbolasers and concussion missiles? If the Alliance really had used it on Caluula, that alone was proof of its potency.

Fy'lyor licked dry lips. “So, you plan on using it against the Vong.”

“Of course,” said Daala. Her hands balled into fists and pounded at her thighs. “We set out on this mission to destroy the Yuuzhan Vong. Eradicate them from the galaxy forever. And that is exactly what we're going to do.”

Fy'lyor had known that. She'd agreed to participate in genocide when she'd joined Admiral Daala's crew. Somehow, she never really understood the true enormity of it until this moment.

It was suddenly very hard to breath.

“We're working on distribution methods now,” Daala continued. “Naturally, we can't just pack vials into explosive missiles. For Zonama Sekot, at least, we should be able to program a probe that flies into its atmosphere, then releases the bio-weapon as a spray. For the battle ships, we're not yet certain. Some kind of boring missile, like the one we used to attach the homing device, may be useful. We only have a limited supply of the weapon, and it is very important that we make optimal use of it.”

Fy'lyor was hardly listening. To so thoroughly eradicate an entire enemy race from the galaxy seemed too brutal, so ruthless, so... *Imperial*. Not the kind of Empire Jagged Fel, Vitor Reige, or Gilad Pellaeon had built, but the Empire of Darth Vader, Emperor Palpatine, and Grand Moff Tarkin.

Tarkin, who had been Daala's mentor and lover.

Fy'lyor cursed herself for being so blind. Daala had talked about bringing the Empire back to its roots. *This* was its root: the extermination of all enemies, and subjugation of entire races.

There was strength and order, and there was brutality and mass-murder. There was a line between the two, one Fy'lyor feared to cross.

She didn't know if any of that was showing on her face. Apparently not, because Daala, still eager, leaned forward and placed one of her hands on Fy'lyor's own.

"When the next fight comes, we will be ready to end it *permanently*," she said. "I just wanted you to know that, and be prepared. We must keep it top-secret for now, but once the deed is done, I will make certain the whole galaxy knows the part you played in bringing about this total victory."

There were no words. Fy'lyor's jaw creaked open. She managed to say, "Thank you, Admiral."

"My pleasure," Daala smiled as she sat back. "Together, my dear, we shall make history."

Vilath Dal had not expected his former mentor, irascible at the best of times, to cooperate with her kidnappers. He was, therefore, surprised when Qelah Kwaad eagerly threw herself into the examination of Darth Krayt's Vonduun Crab armor. He realized how starved for a true challenge his mentor had become. That desire seemed to have carved out a piece of her sanity while leaving her scientific skills in tact. While he was grateful for her help, Vilath Dal was now aware how close he'd come to falling down her same path of madness.

For that, he supposed he had to thank the Sith.

Barring Krayt and his scientist Dician, the Sith tended to avoid Vilath Dal. He was not surprised by that; in a way these Sith seemed as secretive and xenophobic as his own people, the difference being that the Sith were a clan you joined of your own will and effort, as opposed to one you were born into. He wondered, a little wistfully, what biological modifications it would take for a Yuuzhan Vong to use the Force. He had to say he admired the Sith for their dedication and purpose.

Vilath Dal, Qelah Kwaad, and Dician worked in conjunction to survey Darth Krayt's situation. The former Master Shaper devoured all of the data already collected about Krayt's curious condition and spent hours with the Dark Lord, performing examinations of her own. Vilath Dal was surprised by the patience with which the Dark Lord took so much prodding, questioning, and occasional slicing by what was clearly a deranged shaper. He didn't expect the creature to show fear, but he'd at least been expecting signs of annoyance or impatience. Instead he simply lay there and took it with almost divine patience.

"Incredible, incredible," Qelah Kwaad muttered to herself as the three of them exited Krayt's chamber, leaving the Dark Lord to meditate and rest. She was fiddling with Vilath Dal's qahsa, which she'd used to perform the survey.

"What is it?" Dician asked. The Sith scientist, much like her master, kept an impassive expression when working with Qelah Kwaad. Vilath Dal felt a little regret that she had not been born Yuuzhan Vong; she would have made a fine shaper. Still, the black tattoos that crawled along her brown face were appealing in their own fashion.

"Incredible, incredible," Qelah Kwaad repeated. She spun an alarmed gaze at Vilath Dal. "Do you understand who he is? *What* he is?"

Vilath Dal thought he did. "What?"

"He is Yun-Yammka in the flesh." Qelah Kwaad slapped the qahsa with the back of her hand, as though it contained incontrovertible proof.

"Yun-Yammka?" Vilath Dal fought a frown.

When he'd studied under Qelah Kwaad she had, like so many shapers, expressed private disdain at the other castes for their rigid belief in the Gods. Her domain had produced at least one notorious heretic, and Qelah Kwaad had had to publically skew to orthodoxy to avoid the taint. Now she seemed to be insisting that the man in other room was an actual God. She'd lost more of her mind that he'd thought.

"Your god of war?" Dician asked, politely curious.

"He is *made* for war," Qelah Kwaad nodded enthusiastically, making the wilted tentacles on her headdress bob. "His body,

molded of human and Yuuzhan Vong elements. The fire in his eyes. The anger in his soul.”

She was speaking metaphorically, then. Good. Vilath Dal had started to worry. He asked, “Do you think there is a way to stop the armor's growth into his wound?”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Qelah Kwaad nodded. “Most certainly.”

Vilath Dal didn't breathe relief yet. “How do you plan to do it?”

The old shaper chuckled. “You never had the touch with our biologicals the way I did, Vilath Dal. The matter is simple. We need to make that piece of armor cease to grow.”

“And how will that be accomplished?”

She chuckled again. “We must take it out, of course.”

“That would kill him,” Dician objected.

Qelah Kwaad shook her head again. “You don't understand, Sith. Not at all. We remove that piece of armor and replace it with another. Simple as that.”

It wasn't simple at all. The armor plating had joined with Dark Krayt, binding tissue and even organs with a strange hybrid of human and Yuuzhan Vong biology. In theory, one could physically tear the armor out, but that would kill Krayt and the armor within minutes.

“We must breed a replacement first,” Qelah Kwaad said. “And then, careful surgery.”

Vilath Dal glanced at Dician. He could see the hesitation on her face, probably much like his own. Still, he had brought Qelah Kwaad for this purpose. He had run out of ideas himself, and he saw little option other than to trust that his old mentor was still competent.

Qelah Kwaad looked at him and asked, “What kind of shaping facilities does Maal Lah have aboard the fleet?”

“Quite adequate, actually,” he said. That had been a condition of Vilath Dal's joining True Honor in the first place.

“Excellent. We must go there at once.” Qelah Kwaad started for the exit portal.

“Take half the guard and go back to the shuttle,” he told her. “Leave the rest with me. I have a few things to take care of, but I'll be along shortly.”

Qelah Kwaad barely noticed. She just nodded and walked right out the door.

Vilath Dal released an exasperated sigh and looked at Dician. "She was not always like this, I assure you."

"You can tell there's a keen mind working beneath everything else," Dician said. "Do you think she can do it?"

"It's possible. If anyone can, it's her. She's the most brilliant shaper alive today."

"Then we have no choice but to trust her. The sooner she can make the attempt, the better."

"Only if she succeeds," Vilath Dal reminded her. "If she fails, we both die. You realize that, don't you?"

"If she fails, and Lord Krayt dies, then my life will be without purpose," Dician said simply. "It would be better to be dead."

So like a Yuuzhan Vong, Vilath Dal thought, though right now he didn't share the sentiment. He'd joined True Honor for the chance to riddle out interesting puzzles and challenge himself in a way he hadn't been since the war ended. He'd wanted to get *more* from his life, not end it entirely.

"Still," Dician said, "There may be one final option..."

"What is that?" Vilath Dal asked. He wanted any ray of hope he could get right now.

Dician looked reticent, like she'd just let something slip.

"Please," Vilath Dal said. "I cannot help save your master if I do not know everything."

"This will not save Lord Krayt," Dician said. "But it may... preserve him."

At this point Vilath Dal's concern was saving his own life. He pressed, "What can you do?"

Dician frowned, still hesitant, but she finally broke away and walked swiftly to the other side of the lab. She pulled open a drawer and appeared to punch some code into a keypad. Vilath Dal heard the hiss of an airtight chamber opening. Dician reached into the unsealed drawer. When she pulled her hand out, she held a long, smooth metal cylinder. It almost looked like *Jeedai* lightsaber, but its circumference was too narrow, and one end narrowed into a point.

"What is it?" Vilath Dal asked. Even after spending months on this strange Rakatan vessel he didn't understand a fraction of it, which was no doubt what his hosts wanted.

"We have brought every last Dark Lord on this mission," Dician said. "Lord Wyyrlok commanded it, because he knew the time of climax was near. However, we still have agents throughout the galaxy. We still own ships, and facilities. In some of those facilities, we have clones."

She would clone Darth Krayt? Vilath Dal couldn't believe that was her solution. Early in their partnership, he and Dician had discussed the cloning methods of their respective peoples, and both had admitted that they were unable to produce clones with the memories of their original person.

"And what is *that*?" He gestured to the cylinder in her hand. "Some... genetic measuring tool?"

Dician cradled it gently in both palms and looked down at it. "This is an experimental piece of technology recovered by some of our agents from a Rakatan vessel like this one. Lord Wyyrlok calls them mindspears. They are designed to transfer the memories from one being to another."

"But *how*?" Vilath Dal asked. He felt at once skeptical, intrigued, and ashamed that his own people hadn't come up with a similar device.

"We inject it into the neck at the base of the skull. It connects with the neural stem of the brain. We developed it with the idea of kidnapping Jedi then replacing them with a clone that contained the Jedi's memories overlaid on a near-identical brain-pattern, modified to produce loyalty to us."

"A double-agent."

"Exactly."

"Were you able to put this plan to the test?"

She shook her head. "There were attempts. Unfortunately, we were never able to insert a spy into the Jedi order."

"A shame," Vilath Dal muttered. His own people had failed in all of their own attempts to infiltrate the Jedi. "Has this device at least been tested? Do you have proof of memory-transfer?"

"The transfer requires that the brain patterns of both sender and recipient be the same," she said. "We have cloned several

One Sith, including Lord Wyyrlok himself, but we have not yet attempted to insert memories into the clone. We have a mature clone of Darth Vidious, in fact, but we did not replicate his memories before his death. It was an unfortunate oversight.”

“Do you have a clone of Krayt?” he asked pointedly.

“No,” Dician shook her head. “Lord Wyyrlok would not allow it. He pointed out, rightly, that Krayt is more than just human now. He is part Yuuzhan Vong. Any attempt to clone him would be very difficult, if not impossible all together. Still, we have samples of his biological material. We could certainly *attempt* to grow a clone, though it would take many years to reach a state of maturity.”

“So *that* is your last hope,” Vilath Dal could not hide his disappointment.

“It is what we have,” Dician said grimly. “That is why you must give Qelah Kwaad every bit of assistance she needs.”

“I am aware of that,” Vilath Dal said sharply.

He eyed the woman for a moment, and again felt admiration for the black tattoos sprawled across her wood-colored face.

“What is it?” she frowned.

“It occurs to me that, in all the time we have worked together, I have always been imposing on you,” Vilath Dal said. “I know your people have not always been comfortable with that. I think it's far past time I made a reciprocal offer.”

Dician's brows furrowing, bunching up the tattoos on her forehead. “Will your people allow me onboard?”

“Oh, I'm sure some will object, and most viciously.” Voran Lah floated to the top of him mind. “However, I believe I can convince Maal Lah that you have much to offer.”

“Can you guarantee my safety?” she asked pointedly.

“Of course. I think you would be very interested in our facilities aboard *Honor Regained*. Once there, the three of us will continue our efforts to fix Darth Krayt, together.”

Dician considered for a moment, then nodded her agreement. Vilath Dal was glad, not just because he enjoyed her company, but also because, just as they three had to work together, they three would live or die together.

No, not three. Four. You couldn't leave out Darth Krayt. Two Yuuzhan Vong and two Sith. Live or die together.

Chapter 17

Jaina spent the rest of the day in a state of constant tension. She fully expected Zonama Sekot to appear before her suddenly with the face of that brown-haired human again, or the little boy, or Nen Yim, or even Jacen himself, and ask for her decision.

But, as yet more evidence of the living world's inscrutability, it had not appeared. She instead went about her day as best she was able, visiting the work crews at the comm station and reviewing the situation with Danni and Harrar. Danni had sent out a number of survey ships to scan the planet's surface both for signs of irregularities and for Ben in particular, but they'd turned up with nothing. Jaina wasn't surprised; it would take weeks to search every corner of the entire planet's surface, and that was assuming Ben was even on this planet at all. For all she knew he could be held captive by the Sith, floating lost in space with Vestara, or even safely aboard *Starless* with Jag. That last option was too appealing to hope for, and she tried to put it out of her mind.

For dinner, she'd gathered around a fire with Tahiri, the Wraiths (barring Scut, laid up in his bunk and refusing to move), and a handful of Ferroan technicians. The conversation was soft and easy, and the stars above their heads had been beautiful. When you were on a spaceship you saw stars through every viewport, but for some reason you only truly appreciated them when you were on a planet, at night, preferably enjoying a meal with good company.

She spent a few hours like that, listening to Sharr and Drikall's lame jokes, gleaning interesting information from the Ferroans, and envying the strangely satisfied look on Tahiri's face.

It hadn't been enough for her to forget the horrible choice she had to make, and when she lay down in the cabin Danni had provided she tossed, turned, and completely failed to sleep. A few times her fatigue almost got the better of her, and she drifted into a woozy half-awake state, but she knew she'd be counting the hours until dawn.

At one point, when she was in one of those near-sleep states, she felt something through the Force, like a hard nudge. She jerked upright and threw back her covers, but stopped before getting out of bed. She had no idea where to go or what to do.

She fumbled in the dark for the switch at her bedside. An artificial glow-lamp, brought from the shuttle, winked on. Gold light spilled across her bedsheets and the curved walls. Sitting in the far corner was an old man.

It wasn't Sekot. She could sense this figure as an individual presence in the Force. It was, however, faint and ethereal, like an echo of something distant but stronger.

Instead of jumping out of bed or calling for help, she curled her legs up against her chest, wrapped both arms around her knees, and asked the ghost, "Who are you?"

"Someone thought I could give you advice," the old man said. He had a white beard, thick but trimmed, and soft blue eyes that seemed strangely familiar. Then she realized that he was dressed in the layered brown robes of a Jedi.

"Were you here?" she asked. "Have you been here before?"

The old man looked around the dark room. "Not this *particular* place... But yes, I was on Zonama Sekot once. A long, long time ago."

This smile on his face was sad and wistful, but also kind. Then Jaina realized where she knew his face from. It was the same one she'd talked to in the field outside the hyperdrive engines. It had been smooth and clean-shaven then, and over thirty years younger, but the something in the eyes and smile were unmistakable.

"I've met you," she muttered.

"I don't think so," the old man shook his head. "I haven't... well, I haven't been *anywhere* since before you were born."

"What's your name?" she asked, though she already knew.

The old man shifted slightly and placed his hands on his knees. "Your uncle used to call me 'Old Ben.' I came here once with your grandfather."

Jaina had no idea what to say, what to think. Her uncle had told her that Ben Kenobi had appeared to him from time to time as a Force ghost, offering important guidance and strength, but had finally stopped appearing not long before Jaina herself was born. From everything Jaina knew and had heard, even the strongest Jedi had appeared as Force ghosts only within a limited window of time after their deaths. No one had understood why, or what that meant. It had always been yet another mystery of the Force.

"How did you get here?" she asked.

Kenobi's smile was amused. "Master Yoda once told me you should never ask the Force *how*. Where, when, even why, those you could hope to answer. But never *how*."

"Then *why*," she asked. "Why here? Why now?"

"I understand you have a choice to make," said Kenobi.

Jaina fought a shudder. "Sekot says it can make my brother live again."

"And do you want that?"

"My brother was a *Sith*. I killed him."

Sadly, Kenobi said, "My brother was a Sith too."

Jaina stared, confused. She knew Jedi in Kenobi's time were taken from their parents at a young age and raised without families. Then she realized.

"My grandfather... You weren't the one who killed him."

"No," the smile grew even sadder. "My brother killed me."

"I'm sorry," It was all Jaina could say.

Kenobi shook his head. "I chose my sacrifice, and it was not in vain. My death allowed your uncle and parents to plant the seeds of the future. And in the end, *they* were the ones who redeemed Anakin."

"My brother *wasn't* redeemed," Jaina said. She felt her face tighten and expected tears to come, but her eyes and throat were dry.

"I know," Kenobi said.

He apparently knew everything, despite being dead. Jaina didn't both to ask *how* this time. "The things he did... He killed our aunt, Luke's wife. He tortured Ben, tried to turn Tahiri dark. He killed so many people..."

"So did Anakin, yet in the end Luke's love redeemed him."

She shook her head. She'd heard that story over and over again, taken it into herself as a symbol of all-powerful redemption, but she couldn't believe in it any more. After her own brother had turned monster, it became too hard to fathom.

She asked, "After Anakin turned dark... after what he did... Did you... blame yourself? For not stopping his fall?"

The old ghost nodded sadly. "I spent many years in exile, watching over your uncle and waiting to redeem myself. Sometimes it seemed like I would spend forever regretting the decisions I had made, the ways I'd let my brother down."

"But you tried, didn't you? I mean, *you* never gave up on my grandfather." He couldn't have. The Kenobi from Luke's stories was always too good, too saintly to do that.

But Kenobi said, "That was your uncle. *He* never stopped believing. *I* told him he had to fight and kill Darth Vader. After everything I had seen your grandfather do, I couldn't believe there was a spark of goodness in him." A tiny smile pulled at his lips. "I was wrong."

"I want to believe," she admitted. "But I *can't*. After all he's done, after the monster he turned into, I can't imagine how he could atone."

"*How*," Kenobi repeated.

"I know, I know. But that's how I'm used to thinking. I'm a mechanic. A pilot. A soldier. I look at the details, the specifics."

"I used to be like that too. It *infuriated* Anakin. And your brother, was he focused on *how*?"

"Not Jacen," she shook her head. "Maybe Anakin, *our* Anakin was. But Jacen... Jacen was all about *who* he was. *What* his place was in the grand scheme of things. The *why* behind it all."

"That sounds like *my* Anakin. Do you think he would have been satisfied by his place as it stands now?"

"No. Of course not. Jacen wanted... he always wanted *more*."

"Then perhaps that's what he needs."

Maybe Kenobi was right. Maybe, given form again, Jacen's soul could find some way to redeem itself. But once again she couldn't figure out *how*, and she couldn't push that doubt out of her mind.

The old ghost sensed her conflict. "In the end, I'm afraid you will have to do what all Jedi do. The same thing I did, when I stepped back from Darth Vader and held my lightsaber in front of me, begging him to strike."

"What is that?"

"Trust the Force," he said. "And trust your uncle and mother to do the things I couldn't. I had to let go before they could make things right in the end."

She found she couldn't deny his argument. She took a deep breath and said, "I still don't know if I can do this."

"Do you want to save your brother's soul?" Kenobi asked.

"Yes. More than anything." She didn't say that it was the only way to save her own.

"Then do what I did, and *trust*."

The tears finally welled in her eyes. She blinked and wiped them away. When she looked up, Kenobi was gone.

She couldn't sleep after that. She threw on a coat and went outside. The night air was damp and surprisingly chill. Shivering, she walked down the lane to a fire burning alone in its pit. She crouched in front of it, warmed her hands, and looked up at the sky. There was the faint hint of dawn in the east, but everything else was still a vista of icy stars against icy blackness.

When she looked back at the fire there was a boy squatting opposite her. She nearly fell back on shock.

The boy gave her a wry grin and asked, "How'd it go?"

Jaina steeled herself, looked the living planet in what amounted to its eyes, and said, "I'm ready. I want to do it."

"Wizard," a smile slanted on the boy's face.

"I want to get Tahiri up," Jaina said. "I promised her she would be with me when I did this."

"Take your time. Make sure you're ready." The boy stood up, and Jaina did too. "It's going to be a little bit of a trip, actually."

"A trip?" Jaina raised an eyebrow.

"Pack warm things," Sekot advised. "You're going someplace cold."

Jaina and Tahiri stood on the mountainside, squinting at sun-bright snow. They had both borrowed insulated pants and jackets from the village, as well as breathing masks and the sleek black Sekotan shuttle now resting fifty meters downslope. Each woman had a heavy pack on her back containing rations, heating tools, a spare set of clothes, and a portable transceiver. Tahiri's lightsaber dangled from her belt. Jaina carried both her own and Bardan Jusik's.

They were as ready as they were ever going to be, so they kept climbing up the mountain to the ruins that lay up ahead, half-buried in snow.

"Why here?" Tahiri asked. She was right next to Jaina but she had to speak extra-loud over the sound of wind.

"Sekot said it was *born* here," Jaina explained. "It said this was where it first achieved consciousness, when the old Magister died during the first Yuuzhan Vong attack."

"Could've picked a better place."

Jaina nodded agreement. In addition to the cold weather and thin atmosphere, the mountain was covered in snow that glared painfully bright in the midday sun. There was not a cloud to be seen, and the high wind sometimes kicked up sprays of snow that swirled upward through the air in elegant white whorls.

In another time it would have been pretty, but right now Jaina just wanted to get it over with.

When they reached the flat promontory on which the ruins sat, both women looked around. Jaina didn't know what to expect. She was hoping Sekot would show up in some form or another and ask her, once more, just to be sure, that she wanted to do this. She didn't want Jacen, whatever Jacen he'd be, to appear before her suddenly.

She needed to brace herself for what was about to happen.

"Cave," Tahiri said, jabbing a finger at a large boxy indentation carved into the mountainside on the far end of the promontory.

"Sounds good," Jaina grunted. Anything to get out of the snow-spraying wind.

From the inside, it was clear this room had been constructed as part of the Magister's palace complex. The wind- and snow-swept walls were cleanly carved, and Jaina thought she saw faint signs of painted frescoes.

"Well," Tahiri asked, "Now what?"

"No idea," Jaina shivered. "Whatever happens, I hope it happens soon."

"No kidding. Is Sekot going to show up at least?"

"I hope so. I think-"

There was a sudden, strong gust of wind that brought sheets of snow swirling through the cavern. Jaina and Tahiri both covered their faces to keep icy flakes from getting in their eyes.

As she buried her face, something struck her so hard she staggered. She heard Tahiri give a short cry, as though pained. Then it rang clear in Jaina's mind, a sensation in the Force she could never forget but had never expected to feel again, and could not believe she'd lived without.

She lowered her arms and raised her eyes to the snow-white glare of the cave mouth, where her brother stood among them.

Part IV: The Traitor

"I want to be something more. I don't know what it is, but I guess I think there's something more to the Jedi than what we've ever been able to recover. I know it's out there, but I don't know what it is... For now, I'm Jacen. What I'll be in the future is anyone's guess."

Jacen Solo, 25 years ABY

"Is it what the teacher teaches, or what the student learns?"
Vergere, 28 years ABY

"I think maybe he broke some other time, when he decided the galaxy was a huge nasty place that needed to be tamed. Whatever gave him that idea, it made such an awful impression that he had to become even more awful to confront it... I think Sith was just another thing, another set of armor and weapons and disguises that he put on top of Jacen. Like 'Jedi' or 'Solo.' He was always Jacen, until he rejected that, too, and became Caedus."

Tahiri Veila, 43 years ABY

A LONG TIME AGO...

The ceiling of the cavern arcs oppressively over his head. Like the walls of the chamber it is rough stone, half-hidden in inky shadow that seems deeper, darker than mere lack of light. At the far end there is a grotto, where water runs from breaks in the stone wall and gathers to form a pool that shines faintly with silver light. Gases seep out from the holes in the wall, the cracks in the ground, and spread lightly across the floor. They reek of brimstone and ash and would choke the life out of anyone who tries to step deeper into the chamber, toward the pool of light.

But Jacen does not need to draw breath, because he has no body. He is a Mind Walker now, and has been for some time—an hour or a year, he cannot tell. He has left behind his physical body in some dark cave in this planet in the Maw and allowed himself to be drawn deeper and deeper into its ominous caverns by a pair of ghoulish beings who have been Mind Walking even longer than him, a Givin named Feryl and a ragged Gotal named Ryontarr. They are goading him toward something, he's not sure what. But he knows he cannot back away.

Though he has left behind his physical body to wander as a projection of the Force, Jacen feels more alive now than he has in a very long time. It has been over four years since the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, and he has been scouring the galaxy for different ways to learn about the Force and explore his place in

it. Deep down, he admits he is searching for a way to fully merge himself with the Unifying Force as he did during his battle with Onimi.

At least, he was. He has met many fascinating beings and learned many astounding things about the Force. He has studied with the Jensaari, meditated with the Baran Do, even reached through the veils of time with the Aang-Tii. Yet, somehow, despite all his searching, he has not been able to recapture what he once knew. After a long time, he has finally, grimly accepted the fact that he never will. Before going in to the Maw and meeting the Mind Walkers, he was starting to resign himself to the fact that all he is, is all he will ever be.

The Mind Walkers sense this. They know the deep yearning inside him, the desire to overcome the barriers within himself and become a being in more perfect unity with the Force. It must have been a similar desire that drove them to surrender their bodies and become Mind Walkers.

First they led him to a place called the Font of Power, promising him the ability to remake the galaxy in any fashion he chose. It was so easy, he couldn't believe it, and he turned them down.

Next they led him further, toward this dark grotto where there lay a pool of silvery light. Like haggard angels they stand at either shoulder now, peering over him, edging him closer to the water and silvery light.

"You call this the Pool of Knowledge?" Jacen asks.

"It is," Ryontarr rasps.

"Who comes up with these names? Do you have a tourist bureau?" He tries to sound flippant. He doesn't want them to know how much this place unsettles him.

"We do not seek tourists. They are... fickle," Feryl says seriously. "What we've been waiting for is you."

"Okay, great," Jacen mutters. They've been appealing to his vanity since they first found him.

He takes two, three, four steps across the cavern. He stands at the edge of the pool and peers down. He assumed the pool would be shallow but as he stares he cannot see the bottom. The water does not pool naturally but is gathered by a rim of stone carved in a serpentine pattern.

Faint silver ripples dash across the surface as new water trickles in to the pool. He leans down and sees his own face: tired, haggard, sickly. The Mind Walkers tell him he cannot die while in meditation, for time has no meaning here, but he doesn't believe them. Perhaps they want him to wander endlessly through their mysterious maze with its ominous names as they suck his life dry like vampires.

He breaks away from his own visage and looks back at the Gotal and the Givin. He asks them, "What am I supposed to see here?"

"This is the Pool of Knowledge," Ryontarr waves a hand. "If you step into it, you will know the deep secrets of the universe, secrets known only to the beings who made this place."

"Have you tried it?"

"Oh, no," the Gotal shakes his head. "We know our fragile minds could not survive the revelation. But you are a great Jedi, perhaps the greatest. If anyone could process the mystery, it is you."

They haven't tried flattery this naked before. They must be desperate. "I'm no Luke Skywalker, sorry. And I don't think even he could step into this Pool and be fine. You said this contains the secrets of the Pool's makers. They're Celestials. I'm just a measely human. My mind could never process their knowledge. It would break me. Even if it didn't kill me I'd be no use to anyone."

Ryontarr doesn't hide his disappointment. "We wish you would reconsider. The knowledge here-

"Is not for me," he says. It pains him to admit his limitations, but while he's still hungry for new knowledge, he is also not a fool. Whatever the Celestials were, they're now long gone from the galaxy. Their secrets, their knowledge, deserve to stay where they are, hidden.

"Very well," Feryl says. "Are you not, at least, interested in the Throne of Balance?"

"That's a new one," Jacen admits. "Okay. Last one. Take me to the Throne of Balance, wherever it is. Then I need a break. I'm feeling pretty tired and I need my beauty sleep."

Feryl gestures forward with a skeletal hand. "There is the Throne of Balance."

Jacen cocks an eyebrow. *"That's the Pool of Knowledge. Or am I missing something?"*

"Stand at the edge," says Ryontarr. "Peer into the Pool. Look for the Throne and it will appear."

Jacen stares down at the water, mirror-dark yet ever moving with faint ripples. *"I just have to look? No touching?"*

"Look," rasps Feryl, "And you will be granted what you seek."

"Okay then," Jacen says and drops down on his knees. He wonders if this is a trick. He doesn't think they'll try and physically throw him into the Pool if he leans in close- they probably don't have the strength. Come to think of it, he doesn't have a body to throw, not exactly.

So he gets down on his hands and knees, leans forward, and stares deeper into his own eyes.

He doesn't know what he's expecting. He doesn't know what he's hoping for. He came into this strange place almost as a routine, one more exotic Force method to learn. Its mysteries have recaptured some of the excitement he first felt when going out on this journey, but he also feels a sense of foreboding he has not known since the Yuuzhan Vong War.

As he stares into the pool, his own reflection falls away. The water still moves only faintly, but something else has changed. Shapes of misty silver light seem to drift across the surface of the pool, but as soon as he his eyes focus on one it disappears and becomes something new. He begins to feel frustrated and believes this will become yet another dead end, another tantalizing oddity that brings him no closer to understanding the true nature of the Force.

Then he sees it. It resolves out of the silvery light: a throne with a high back, sitting on a raised dais. There is a man seated on it. He is dressed in strange armor, rough and organic, with spikes jutting fiercely from the shoulder-pads. On his face is a half-mask, also spiked, that covers his eyes and nose but reveals a square lower jaw lined with black tattoos. The armor suit looks almost Yuuzhan Vong, but he can tell from the man's tight scowling lips that he is human.

Two figures stand at either side of the man. One is a human with tangled blond hair, dressed in black metal armor.

Underneath heavy brows his eyes blaze with anger and his lips are set in a scowl.

On the other side is a woman, tall and beautiful, her red hair falling down her her back in a careful braid. He does not know her, yet she is strangely familiar. She, too, is dressed in black armor. As he watches, the woman reaches out and places a hand on the dark man's armored shoulder. A smile comes to her face and it twists his guts. Surrounding this dark trio are countless acolytes in black robes.

Horror shudders through his body. All this time he has been wandering the galaxy, searching for some deeper purpose in the Force for himself only. He has not bothered himself with the troubles of the galaxy itself. Now it appears an awful future is brewing, an awful future he allowed to happen because of his own self-indulgence. After the end of the war, he'd foolishly thought that peace was achieved and nothing could harm his loved ones ever again.

The problem with happy endings is that nothing is ever truly over.

His mind races back nearly ten years, to his time spent dithering on whether or not to use the Force, until his mother's capture by Tsavong Lah on Duro had forced him to take action. He'd learned then that he couldn't hide from his responsibility as a Jedi to protect the lives of those around him.

After his experience with Vergere, and his brief union with the Force, he'd gone back to his old, monastic path of contemplation and philosophizing while the galaxy threatened to tip once more into darkness. He cannot make the same mistake again.

He's transfixed by the vision, less by the man in dark armor or his angry male acolyte, than by the woman. He knows her, but he doesn't. She almost looks like Tenel Ka, but it's certainly not her. He feels, deep in his gut, that this is a woman he will know, and that she will bring him great joy and great pain.

He knows, with equal sureness, that he must protect this woman at all costs. He must prevent a future where this woman, whoever she is, becomes an acolyte of the dark man.

And whatever pain this woman will bring, he swears it must be his alone to bear.

Suddenly a large ripple washes across the pool, erasing his vision of the Throne of Balance. He staggers back to her feet and turns to Ryontarr and Feryl, who do not seem to have moved at all since he last saw them.

"What did I see?" he asks urgently. He needs to know. His life, and the well-being of the entire galaxy, depends on it. "Was that the future?"

"Perhaps," Ryontarr shrugs. "We think it is more likely a metaphor."

"A metaphor? A metaphor for what?"

"The future," Ryontarr says simply.

Jacen stares, not sure if the ghostly Gotal is attempting a joke. He knows it couldn't be just a metaphor, not completely. The Force was screaming to him that he was connected with that woman in some crucial way.

She wasn't a mere symbol, she was a person, and her fate would hang on his own actions.

And if she was a real person, the dark man on the throne was very likely real too.

He says, "Is there anything else you can tell me? Please, I have to know."

"If you wish to know," says Feryl, "You should step into the water."

For a moment he is tempted. He knows he will need more power and more knowledge to protect this woman from the dark man. But becoming a Celestial is not the way.

Jacen says. "I think I'm going to do much worse than that."

"And what may that be?"

"I'm going back to my body, and then I'm leaving the Maw. I've spent too long mucking around the galaxy doing nothing. I need to finish my training."

"Training?" Ryontarr sounds disappointed. "For what reason?"

"I'm going to change what I saw in that vision," Jacen says. Grim, unswerving purpose settles over him. "And I think it might kill me."

Chapter 18

Jacen was surprised by life.

For a moment he knew it all: the featureless white-out of agony, the red tide of rage, the black hole of despair, the gamma-sleet of loss; and the lush verdure of growing things, the grays of stone and duracrete, the glimmer of gemstones and transparisteel, the blue-white sizzle of a noonday sun and its exact echo in a lightsaber's blade.

Then the moment was gone, and all he knew was biting cold and blinding light. He closed his eyelids but they burned red. He tried to lift his head but his shoulders and back were too weak.

Eyelids, shoulders, back. He'd forgotten these things, trapped for a second and forever in the nothingness of death. In death he had been restless will, simmering anger, aching regret, so much memory. But there had been no body, no force and no object. In timeless nothing he had been a mind without form, a machine without function. Death had taken him so close to his desire to merge with the Force, yet so horribly far.

When Luke had summoned him in the Lake of Apparitions his formless will had merely been pulled back into Time for a short while, before merging again into the nothingness of death. Now, as pain trilled through his body, sharper than any memory, he understood that this was different. He was back again, truly *alive*.

He was alive, and he had no idea how or why.

With effort, Jacen opened his eyes.

He was crouched, feet and knees on the cold stone floor of a snow-swept cave. A brown jumpsuit covered his body, but his

feet and hands were bare. An icy chill ran up his arms and legs to make his whole body shiver.

With effort, he raised his head.

Two figures stood over him, their shapes buried in layers of insulated clothing. They had packs on their backs and hoods over their heads and white breathing masks over their mouths. When he saw those Jacen realized how short of breath he was. At first he'd thought breathing was difficult because he'd half-forgotten it in death, but now he realized that he was in a cave high up on some snowy mountain peak, where the atmosphere was thin.

He blinked dry eyes. He knew this cave. He had been here, dressed just like these two figures, a long time ago.

He was on Zonama Sekot.

Zonama Sekot had brought him back from the dead, body and spirit.

He tried to rise on shaking legs. His bare feet pressed down on the hard floor of the cave, sending another wave of cold through his body. He wrapped his arms around himself in a futile effort to hold back the cold. Two arms, he realized. He'd only had one when Jaina had thrust her saber-blade through his heart.

He looked again at the two figures. They were both a head shorter than him, and thin like women. Though most of their faces were hidden he could see their eyes. Both pairs were wide in shock.

One pair was a brilliant green. A few strands of blond hair snuck out from the furred rim of the woman's hood. He saw in them a mix of shock, horror, fear, and hatred.

Tahiri.

He looked at the second woman. He knew who it would be. In his sister's brown, intense stare he saw a war of rage and regret and sorrow and joy.

"Jaina." Words scraped out of his throat. "Please... help me."

She didn't move. She didn't even blink. Neither did Tahiri. It was like both of them were frozen statues.

Jacen opened himself up to the Force. He felt both of them burning like novas, each one warring a thousand different emotions.

He didn't understand, but he needed to. He *always* needed to understand.

"Please," he repeated. He keeled forward as the cold stabbed deeper into his body.

Tahiri moved first. She slid the pack off her back and tossed it in front of him. Jacen crouched down and pulled it open. Boots. Gloves. A thermo-jacket. He fumbled on the gloves, then the boots, resting his backside on the cold cave floor while he sheathed his exposed skin. He threw on the jacket, hastily zipped it, and pulled the hood over his head.

He was still cold, so cold it hurt, but at least it wasn't going to kill him moments after being reborn.

Reborn. He marveled at that. In the moment and eternity of death he had resigned himself to meaning nothing, doing nothing, being nothing other than a restless swarm of regret and anger.

Now Zonama Sekot had resurrected him. Zonama Sekot, and the sister who had killed him in the first place.

"Why?" he rasped again, even though the cold air raked through his lungs. He had to know.

Neither woman responded. Tahiri placed a hand on the lightsaber dangling from her belt. Jaina remained frozen, but Jacen noticed for the first time that she wore not one saber, but two.

He looked at her eyes again and saw them hardened with suspicion and contempt.

It pained him worse than the cold. In death he'd forgotten how sharp it could be. He thought he'd accepted it all. He'd even embraced being hated by everyone he'd once loved, because it was his destiny, his purpose. For the greater good of the galaxy he'd been willing to sacrifice anything and anyone. In time, he'd even drawn confidence from their hatred and strength from his own pain, as though suffering was proof of the rightness of his actions.

But now he saw the hate in both their eyes, and he knew he deserved every bit of it.

"Please," he gasped, "Just tell me *why*."

He thought they'd stare at him forever like baleful statues. Finally, Jaina spoke. "He said to trust the Force."

"What?" Jacen shook his head. "Jaina, just tell me—"

"I'll trust the Force," she said. "But I won't trust you."

She reached into the pocket of her jacket and threw something at his feet. A pair of secure metal stun-cuffs. His first instinct was to laugh; no simple mechanical toys could hold *him*. But he was the one freezing and gasping for air, and they were the ones with lightsabers. So he reached down and clamped one cuff around his right wrist. Before he could shackle his left one, Jaina said, "Turn around."

There was no point in arguing. He turned to face the mouth of the cave. As he squinted at the brilliant snow-white slope, she clamped the shackle on his other wrist, effectively sealing both hands behind his back.

"Okay," his sister said. "March."

He marched. When he stepped out into the sunlight the snow became even more blinding and the wind more chilling. He saw the black, gleaming form of a Sekotan shuttle-craft down the slope and knew where to go. Jaina and Tahiri stayed behind him the entire time, and he had to take every step slowly and carefully, with the sides of his boots angled outward for maximum stability. With his hands behind his back, he had to twist his torso in this direction and that in order to attain balance, and every motion ached the muscles on his back and stomach.

When he got to the shuttle he looked over his shoulder. Jaina was about three meters behind him, Tahiri six. He couldn't read their eyes from that distance but they still poured the same mix of suspicion, hatred, and disbelief through the Force.

"Can you get up?" Jaina asked brusquely.

"I can," Jacen said, though he wasn't sure.

His body was aching and exhausted and his mind addled. He tried to draw power from the Force and lift his feet off the ground. He could touch the Force, feel its energy flow through him as it always had, but it didn't seem like he would budge. Then a strong gust of wind took him in the back, and the soles of his boots left the snowy slope.

He allowed himself to rise on the gust of air. He levitated until he was hovering over the smooth black wing the Sekotan ship, then let himself fall gently. His damp boots slipped on the

wing's gentle curve and he dropped to all fours to keep from falling.

When he recovered his balance, he looked up and saw Tahiri and Jaina standing on either side of the open dorsal hatch, waiting for him.

Jaina dropped into the shuttle first, then stepped aside to let Jacen enter. The interior was not warm, but at least it provided relief from the wind and thin air. The thick, full air made his lungs sting, and as he gasped in rich, painful gulps of oxygen Tahiri dropped onto the deck behind him. With a flick of the Force she closed the hatch, sealing the three of them inside.

The women drew back their hoods and unhooked their breathing masks, each using their left hands while their right ones stayed close to their lightsabers. Both looked much as he remembered them, but different; more tired, more haggard, more bitter and suspicious, but they hadn't aged considerably, which was good. It meant he hadn't been gone too long.

"Now what?" he looked at Jaina, then Tahiri. He didn't bother asking them to take the shackles off.

"Let's go to the cockpit," Jaina said. She turned and walked down the corridor. Jacen followed, Tahiri some two meters at his heels.

Bright sunlight, amplified by the glaring snow, shone through the gem-like material of the cockpit's forward viewport. In here it was nearly as bright as outdoors, and Jacen could take in everything clearly: the control panels, the high-backed seats for the pilot and copilot, the two lower-backed seats of passengers behind those.

He saw something flicker over the shoulder-rest of the right passenger seat. Then the seat rotated to face the entryway. Squat on the seat of the chair, like a bird hunkered in its nest, was Vergere.

Her feathers rustled as her long neck extended, raising her head and flaring the crest of feathers between her eyes. Her head tilted slightly, and her big black eyes watching him curiously.

He reached out in the Force for his old mentor but she was not there. This was Sekot, the living world. Sekot, the one who had somehow brought him back to life.

"Please, all of you, have a seat," Sekot said. "We have a good deal to talk about."

Tahiri and Jaina stared at Vergere's image but did not move. Jacen surmised that they were just as surprised by its appearance as he was.

If they would not sit, he would. He walked over to the other passenger seat, turned it to face Vergere's image, and sat down. He hunched forward awkwardly, hands still clasped behind his back, and stared into the apparition's well-black eyes like he was searching for the planet's soul.

"Why?" he asked. "Why did you bring me back?"

A smile settled on Vergere's mouth. "It's very good to see you too, Jacen."

"You might be alone in that." He glanced over at Tahiri and Jaina, who remained standing and staring at the two of them like they wouldn't believe either was really there.

He looked back to Sekot and said, "Please. I need to know. *They* don't seem to want to tell me anything."

"This is very difficult for them" Sekot admonished.

"It's difficult for me too. I was dead, Sekot. *Dead*. I've been many places, studied with different sects, and *none* of them believed the Force could return to dead to life. Certainly not when their bodies had been destroyed. Plenty claimed to *speak* with the ghosts of the dead, but this..." He shook his head.

"You know this is no ordinary place. You, Jacen Solo, are no ordinary being."

"It brought back Mara," Jaina said. There was no accusation as she named the woman Jacen had killed. She was too shocked for that. "Ben talked to his mother."

"Ben," Jacen echoed.

He hadn't even thought of the teenager. And if Jacen had been gone, even for a few years, he was surely a man now. He tried to remember the last time he had ever seen his cousin, the promising young Jedi who had once followed him, adored him, and lavished him with trust and affection. It had probably been over Kashyyyk, when he'd strapped Ben in the Embrace of Pain and tortured him until Luke came to free him.

He felt a stab of regret over that, but he tried to force it down. Yes, he should never have tortured Ben. It was a mistake to

pull him away from his parents and lead him down the dark, difficult path of the Sith. What he'd done, he'd done for the sake of the galaxy. It may have been a mistake, but his intentions were good. His cause was noble. He had to cling to that, even now, despite the claim Luke had made in the Lake of Apparitions about the ancient enemy he'd supposedly unleashed.

"Is Ben here?" he asked finally, looking at his sister.

To his surprise, Jaina glanced at Vergere's image.

It cocked its head thoughtfully. "I believe he is on this planet, yes. I sense his faint presence... and another's. But I can't pin down their location yet."

He saw the concern on Tahiri's face, and the scowl on Jaina's. He asked, "What 'other'?"

"Long story," Jaina grunted, and volunteered nothing else.

Jacen knew he wasn't going to get anything out of her; there was no point in pressing. He asked Sekot, "Is Mara still here? Did you bring her back, *really* bring her back, like you did me?"

He didn't know what answer he wanted to hear. He didn't hold it against his aunt for trying to kill him- she'd been protecting Ben after all, and lost besides. He did not, however, want to risk her further wrath.

But Vergere's head wagged from side to side. "No. I was merely able to summon her as a specter. She talked with your cousin for a short time, then was gone."

"Why? What was the different between her and me?"

Vergere seemed to sigh. "Thus far I have only been able to contact the departed spirits of those whom I knew in life. Yours is the only one I have been able to give form to, and even I cannot say how long it will hold."

"What do you mean?" Tahiri spoke up. "Is he just going to... fade away all of a sudden?"

She talked about him like he was an object, not a person. Probably that distance was her way of getting through the shock and pain of seeing him here, being with him after all he'd put her through. He found he regretted that, also, not because his goals had been wrong, but because Tahiri deserved better than the painful path of the Sith.

From the moment he'd seen the image of the Dark Man on the Throne of Balance, he'd known in his gut that it was a painful fate he'd have to bear alone. Yet he'd tried to drag Ben and Tahiri along because he wanted an apprentice, because he was weak and lonely, because he wasn't ready to embrace the pain of sacrifice fully. All things considered, it had been a major step in his downfall.

Sekot, meanwhile, considered its question. It said, "I am no longer sustaining Jacen's spirit, as I was Mara. His body and soul are merged. His... restlessness, his *need* to live again, is unlike anything I have felt before. If that great desire passed from him, I don't know if I will be able to bring him back. If he were to leave the planet, his body would probably dissolve, but as long as he is here, he might continue to live, as a normal human would. Or perhaps not. But I cannot say. I have never done this before."

As a normal human would. The idea shocked Jacen. He was still trying to believe this wasn't some grandiose fantasy concocted by a mind lost too long in death's nothingness. He was here, on Zonama Sekot, alive again. He could live out the rest of a normal life here.

He could see Allana and Tenel Ka again.

He stuffed that thought aside. He'd just berated himself for being weak and relying others. The thought of his lover and daughter ached him worse than even the biting cold, but they were a distraction light-years away. Worse, they probably hated him as much as Jaina and Tahiri, if not more. Not that he could blame them.

"Why do I have a body?" he asked. "Why could you resurrect me and not Mara?"

"You are unique. Not truly Jedi, nor truly Sith. More importantly, your spirit has always been restless, and remained so, even in death. Mara Jade had accepted her end. Her soul was at peace with oblivion, just like the souls of the other old friends I've been able to touch. She had no desire to be resurrected."

"But I'm different," he said knowingly.

"Yes," said Sekot. "Of all the souls I've touched through the veil, you alone not just wanted. but *needed* to come back."

When he'd died and merged with the Force, he had accepted it. The Galactic Alliance he'd left behind was strong. Tenel Ka and Allana were safe. The Dark Man in his vision had been defeated. Every evil he'd done had been vindicated.

And then Luke Skywalker had wandered in the Maw, pulled him out of death's timeless stasis, and told him that his attempts to change the future had freed some ancient Celestial-born monstrosity called Abeloth. Worse, Jacen had *seen* with his own spectral eyes the Dark Man himself, staggering away from the pool where he and Luke had beaten Abeloth.

Trapped in the nothingness beyond death, his soul had raged. He had fought, sacrificed, and suffered, and he hadn't achieved his goal. It added mockery of the damage he'd done to himself and those he loved. Trapped beyond life, there was nothing his soul could do except rage in impotence.

Nothing, until Sekot had thrown him a helping hand.

He looked at Jaina and Tahiri. "Is that what you want me to do, clean up the mess I made? Fine. Tell me about Abeloth. I thought Luke killed her."

"She is dead, more or less," Jaina said stiffly.

"What does *that* mean?"

"She has many bodies," Tahiri said. "Master Skywalker killed one. I killed two more."

He raised an eyebrow. The Tahiri he'd tricked into being his apprentice hadn't been powerful enough to vanquish an ancient Force abomination two times over. She looked harder now, more confident, as though she had grown hard and strong through her suffering. He was glad for that. The woman he'd made apprentice had been broken and sick in the soul.

"I had some help," Tahiri admitted. "But it doesn't matter. Abeloth won't be coming back any time soon. We have *other* problems."

He felt something he hadn't felt in a long, long time: fear. Because if they didn't want his help against Abeloth, there was only one other being it could be.

"That Dark Man," he said. "The one from my vision."

"I never saw this Throne of Balance, and I never had visions of a Dark Man like Uncle Luke," Jaina said. "But we're up against Sith."

He couldn't help but laugh. "So you get a Sith to fight another Sith? Is that how it works?"

"You're not a Sith, and you never were." Tahiri snapped, suddenly angry. "You were never a Jedi either. You're just *Jacen*, whatever Jacen you want to be at any given time. And you keep changing, even when we're not looking, and then you--"

She stopped, looked away, trembling. She welled with emotion; not the needy desperation that had drawn her to the Dark Side but a hard layer of hatred for Jacen and for herself, and beneath that, the ache of disappointed love and failed hopes.

"Tahiri, I'm sorry," he said. He didn't think, just said it, and was surprised when the words left his mouth. He'd spent so long defending his own choices to himself and others he'd forgotten the last time he'd admitted being in the wrong.

She didn't look at him, or acknowledge his apology. He didn't blame her. He didn't expect anyone to forgive him for the things he'd done.

He looked back at Vergere's image. "Okay, so you want me to fight the Dark Man. Good. I'll do that, happily. I already died once trying to stop him. I'll do it again if I have to."

He heard a sound from Jaina, like something had lodged in her throat. She was staring at him, one hand raised to cover her mouth. Her dark brown eyes gleamed with water.

He couldn't bear to look at her. He turned to face Vergere's image once more. "Tell me about the Dark Man. Is he here, on Zonama?"

"Not yet," Vergere's head shook. "But he is coming, and soon. I can feel it. He is coming with... my wayward children."

"Yuuzhan Vong?" Jacen frowned. When he'd glimpsed the spectral image of the Dark Man in the Pool of Knowledge he had seemed to be weary heavy spiked armor, almost like that of a Vondun Crab, despite being clearly human.

"Most of my children are still here," Sekot said, with a hint of defensiveness. "However, some of them have been incited by the Sith and returned to the old ways."

"They're going to tear the whole galaxy apart," Tahiri said. Jacen glanced at her; she still couldn't look at him. "We need to

stop the fighting here, in the Unknown Regions, before it spreads to the known galaxy.”

“All right,” Jacen said simply. “I’ll do anything I can.”

Small surprise showed on their faces. If they’d expected it to be difficult, or thought he’d join this Sith-Yuuzhan Vong alliance, they hadn’t understood him at all. Everything he’d done, no matter how horrible, had been for the greater good of the galaxy. It had been to preserve the Alliance and prevent the Dark Man from ever reigning.

Moreover, he found he still had a fond spot in his heart for Zonama Sekot; one of the few fond spots left. His stay here had been brief, but he remembered an enchanting place where the Force flowed gracefully through every living being, creating a beautifully unified whole. He didn’t want to see such beauty despoiled by the Dark Man.

“What else can you tell me?” he asked Sekot. “What else do you need?”

Vergere seemed to sigh again. “There are... a great many things I’d wish to have, Jacen Solo. But I don’t think I’m ready to talk about them yet. There are things I must... consider.”

He was surprised to find the living world reticent. It seemed strangely human in its apparent self-doubt.

“When you’re ready, I’d like to talk more,” he said. He didn’t expect to get much conversation out of Tahiri or Jaina for a while.

“Of course, Jacen Solo,” Vergere’s head bobbed. “As would I.”

Then Jacen blinked, and it was gone.

The cockpit suddenly yawned with silence and bright emptiness. He rose to his feet, glanced out the viewport at the snow-bright mountainside, then looked to Jaina and Tahiri.

“That’s it, then” he said. “We should get going.”

Neither woman moved, or looked at him.

“Well, I can’t pilot myself.” He jangled his restrainer cuffs.

Tahiri moved for the co-pilot’s seat. She kept her blond head down and one hand on her lightsaber. Jacen stepped against the wall to let her pass, then waited for Jaina to move.

His sister lingered on the far wall, staring at the floor, her face hidden by a curtain of brown hair. Then she walked for the

pilot's seat. As she passed Jacen her head tilted up, the hair fell away, and her eyes locked with his.

Through their gaze, through the Force, through their old longlost twin bond, he felt it all: the grief, the anger, the regret, the empty aching hole he'd torn in her life; the lost warmth of trust and shared memories.

It lasted only a second, and then it was gone.

He tried to remember the last time he'd seen his sister, talked to her, when they didn't have lightsabers in hand. He tried and failed, and was surprised how much that hurt.

Jaina sat down at the pilot's seat and began pre-flight checks. Jacen sat down in the passenger seat behind, hunched awkwardly forward again. After a minute Jaina started the engines. The ship rose into the bright blue sky, accelerated smoothly, and soared among white peaks and white clouds.

As the ship banked, sunlight spilled on Jacen's face, gently warming it. Long before he'd died, he'd forgotten how good it felt to be alive.

Chapter 19

The shoreline was at once one of the harshest and most beautiful things Vestara had ever seen. The water was a clear, pristine blue that glimmered in the midday sun as it stretched endlessly toward the horizon, where it met an even bluer sky. Only a few thin white cloud-streaks interrupted the featureless blue dome that spanned in every direction. The land was a different story. Swathes of smooth black rock, born from the cooled lava of an active volcano, ran downslope until it suddenly plunged into the sea. Thin trails of still-flowing molten rock, seeping down conduits buried by layer upon layer of cooled lava, released sporadic geysers of reeking brimstone through cracks within the obsidian landscape. In the near distance, some fifty meters down the black-cliff shoreline, fresh lava poured into the sea, fueling a never-ending cloud of black steam that rose from the blue water with a constant angry hiss.

She stood on the cliff's edge for a long time, watching the beautiful ocean and the hellish black landscape grind against each other and send an ugly plume into the sky. She didn't know what to make of it, but something told her a Sith should appreciate such savage contrast.

Ben wasn't so impressed.

"We should keep going," he told her. "We need to find food somewhere, and there's nothing here."

Vestara gave him a baleful glare, from which he didn't flinch. It wasn't that damnable Skywalker nobility that kept him from being scared. The young Jedi was a bruised, dirty, sweaty mess. He looked so exhausted he could barely stand, and she could feel his weariness through the Force.

She nodded, and they continued their trek across the island.

At first they hadn't known it *was* an island, but at this point it seemed pretty incontrovertible. They'd been walking along the coast for the better part of a day, had spotted no land on the blue horizon, and were clearly working their way around the slow curve of a coastline. The face of the black volcano, always on their left side, had gradually changed but the peak itself remained in a constant position.

When Ship had been torn out of the sky, Ben and Vestara both had been tossed around its cabin like children's toys. The sheer violence of their fall should have killed them, but somehow Ship had projected itself into both their minds, keeping Vestara conscious and waking Ben. As it tumbled back toward the planet's surface, Ship had opened its main portal. Moments before smashing into the ocean surface, the ancient Sith meditation sphere had thrown them free, and sent a parting message through both their minds: *Together, seek your destiny!*

Through luck or intention, Ship had tossed them into the water not far from a coastline. Vestara could barely swim with only one arm, but Ben, noble Skywalker that he was, had reached out with the Force and helped her to the black-sand beach that sat at the end of the broad obsidian plain.

When her exhaustion had cleared, the first thing Vestara felt was grief. She'd never understood what Ship was exactly—ancient machine, living spaceship, overgrown pet hound— but it had been her only companion for years. She'd thought she'd gotten used to a fate of loneliness, but she'd had one good, trustworthy friend all along. She only realized that once it was dead.

Like so many things in her life, it was a lesson too late.

The ocean water on her face hid any tears. She'd pushed the sorrow aside, plucked the lightsaber from her belt, and pointed its violet blade at Ben. She'd told him to march, and he'd complied without a word.

They walked for hours, saying very little. Ben staggered over the uneven black terrain. He was clearly exhausted, thirsty, hungry, and dangerously fatigued. Vestara wasn't much better. The air was much warmer and thicker than it had been in the village she'd taken Ben from. Most likely that had crashed somewhere near Zonama Sekot's equator. The sweat seeping out of her skin deprived her further of precious water and salts. Her lips were getting dry and cracked. Even the salty blue-green ocean water was starting to look tempting.

They walked and walked, and Vestara was starting to think the entire island must have been just a massive plain of obsidian. It was fitting luck, she thought bitterly. You're fortunate enough to survive a crash-landing, crawl up onto a land, and discover the whole thing is a brand-new volcanic island without a single bit of vegetation or fresh water. It seemed like an especially cruel way to die, but then, Vestara's whole life had been repeated exercises and hope and disappointment, so why should her death be any different?

Such grim thoughts were rolling around in her mind as she and Ben staggered across the dried lava beds. The black stone reflected and amplified the heat from the sun, making the situation even more unbearable. The only relief was the breeze, and even that came not swift or cool, but in the rolling of one wave of hot muggy air after another.

Some time after the sun had begun its descent, after Vestara had stumbled and nearly fallen twice on the smooth black rock, Ben pointed one arm forward and said, "Look!"

Vestara picked up her head with effort. She saw more ridges of black stone up ahead, and the vast sunny sky, but where to two met, she thought she saw a patch of tempting green, wavering somewhat in the hot humid air.

"Come on," Ben grunted, and picked up his pace.

If Ben could do it, so could she. She called on the Force for a little extra energy, and put concentration into every new step. She neither slipped nor fell the rest of the way. Eventually, finally, they reached the edge of the obsidian plain. Low, mossy green grass appeared suddenly, first as tufts peeking through cracks in the rock face and then quickly overtaking the rocks. Bushes and ferns popped up after that and just a hundred

meters from the spread of black stone a complete forest of bora trees raised their boughs to the sky.

Vestara could barely contain her relief. She followed Ben across the green plain and into the forest. They ducked into the shade and she immediately felt better. Ben staggered and half-fell against the trunk of one tree, breathing deeply and savoring relief from the burning-hot sunlight.

"Come on, Jedi," Vestara grunted. "We need food. Water."

Ben turned dazed white eyes at her. "Where?"

"I don't *know*," she said. She didn't have the energy to get angry at him so she settled for surly.

"This is... different from the forest up north," Ben said. "The boras... younger, I think. Shorter. Tropical."

"Fruit," Vestara said. "We need fruit."

Ben nodded. With effort he pushed himself away from the tree and staggered onward. Vestara followed. Relief from the sun renewed her energy, but only a little. She was still sweaty, hungry, and perilously low on fluids.

After some five or twenty minutes of staggering around the tree-trunks and through low-growing clumps of ferns, Ben bent over and started grabbing at something.

"What is it?" Vestara asked as she staggered over to him.

Ben held up one hand, bearing a round orange fruit the size of his fist. When he turned around she saw he'd already half-stuffed another one into the mouth, spilling foamy juice down his jaw. He looked like an overgrown toddler and Vestara would have laughed if she'd had the energy. As it was, she took the fruit and ate.

In the back of her mind she knew that it could be poisonous, or it could make her throw up what little was in her stomach, but she didn't care and neither did Ben. The fruit had a delicious tang to it, and more importantly it held a lot of water inside. When she gulped the first one down she looked to Ben. He was already starting his second.

A half hour later they'd stripped the bush clean. She was more than sick of the taste by then, but it still felt wonderful to have food and water in her body again. It was almost enough to make her forget the part about being stranded on a deserted

island with the boy she'd loved and sworn to hand over to the Dark Lord of the Sith.

When he finished the last fruit, Ben looked at the bush and stared laughing. It was a tired, wheezing laugh that rattled his tired body but he didn't seem to be able to stop.

"What?" Vestara snapped, annoyed but also amused. "What is it?"

"I just thought," Ben said between chuckles, "What if that's the only bush with fruit on the whole kriffing island?"

It was a horrible thought, but for some reason Vestara started laughing too.

"I thought, what if that's it?" Ben laughed. "I thought, we're really in trouble now."

"That's not funny," Vestara said, but she laughed anyway.

"I know. I know. But it's..." Ben's laughter ran dry. He shook his head. "Aw, fierfek. Ves, are we-"

"Stop!" Vestara commanded. She put her hand on the saber attached to her belt but didn't take it out. "Just keep walking, Jedi."

Ben held out his arms and looked around the forest. "Walk where?"

"Until we find another bush. Or some meat, or some fresh water."

"Okay, fine," Ben looked dejected.

Vestara heard something rustling overhead. She glanced up, then back down to Ben, but he hadn't made a move. He was looking up too.

"I think I saw a bird," he said. "Maybe two. Had these long tail-feathers, looked kind of like... rainbows."

"Well, if we really need meat, we can catch one of those."

"With what?" he asked.

"I'm a *Sith*, Ben," Vestara said. "I'm not afraid to kill things with the Force."

He stared at her for a long time before he asked, "Are you, Ves? Are you a Sith?"

"Get moving," she said forcefully.

Ben apparently didn't have the energy to put up a fight. He kept walking, and Vestara followed with her hand on the lightsaber.

As the day wore on the shadows left by the trees slanted and stretched. The sunlight that pierced through the tree-columns grew deeper shades of gold. Vestara was beginning to wonder whether they would end up lost in the dark. Her stomach was already starting to feel hollow again. It ached for protein or anything filling.

Just as the shadows were getting too deep for them to move safely through the forest, Ben led them into a clearing. It was located on a mild slope, where black rock jut out from the incline. They spotted a few bushes on the edge of the clearing with the same fruit they'd just eaten, and each of them grabbed a handful for before starting for the outcropping. In the last light of day, Ben and Vestara made their way to the top of it and sat down on the black, worn stone.

For a while they ate in silence. From their position they could see the black-stone peak of the volcano, a broad swathe of forest spreading further to the west, and the last glimmerings of light on the ocean in the far northern distance.

When she couldn't take the silence any more, she asked, "Well?"

"Well what?" Ben said.

"Are you going to do anything? Say anything? I *kidnapped* you, Ben. And then Ship crashed and we ended up stuck on some deserted island and nobody knows if we're alive or dead. And we don't know if *they're* alive or dead. We could be trapped here forever. Don't you have anything to say?"

He looked at her with a blank expression. She couldn't tell if he was too tired to think or if he was hiding his thoughts. She couldn't sense anything from him in the Force.

"Aren't you at least going to try to escape?" she asked.

"Where would I go?" Ben gestured to the jungle spread around them. "I'm pretty sure nobody's here. We'll both be safer if we stick together. So you don't need to stay up all night with one hand on your lightsaber. But you'll try to do it anyway, won't you?"

"Trust is not the way of the Sith."

"But you're not really a Sith, are you?"

He asked it so easily, so calmly. She felt a spike of anger and said, "If I'm not a Sith, then what am I?"

He stared at her with those dull eyes for so long she didn't think he was going to respond. Finally, he said, "Tell me about the people you're with now."

There, out with it at last. She'd been starting to wonder if he was at all curious as to what she'd kidnapped him for, what she'd been up to since he last saw her. Deep down, a shameful part of her just wanted him to care.

"They're Sith," she said. "They call themselves the One Sith. They've been in hiding for... a long time. I don't even know how long."

"And why did they want me? They didn't go after Jaina."

She wondered how Ben knew they hadn't. Probably he had some intimate connection with his cousin through the Force, the kind of deep-set familial bond she'd always envied him for. She admitted, "No. They didn't. I was tasked to capture you, specifically."

"Why?"

"Their leader wants you. He seems to have a big thing against Skywalkers."

Ben glanced at the darkening treetops, then back to her. "Is this leader a big man, wearing spiked armor?"

"He fought Abeloth with your father," she said. "He was wounded, and he went to the Yuuzhan Vong for help healing. He has... some kind of armor they built. I think he was their captive once."

Ben considered the information in silence. Vestara didn't know why she'd told him so much detail.

"And once you deliver me, what happens to you?" he asked.

Vestara blinked. Did he care about that? She hardly did. She'd carried out Krayt's order, or attempted to, because she knew she had no other option. The Dark Lord of the Sith was not a being you said no to.

"He said I would join them," she told Ben. "I would become One Sith and help them carry out their revenge on the Jedi."

"Revenge," Ben sighed. "Kind of lame, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Somebody hurts you, you hate them, you hurt them back, they hate you more and try to hurt you again... It's pretty boring, right? Repetitive?"

"All right," Vestara said. "How about your father promises not to get in the Lord Krayt's way? Try it and see what happens."

She realized she shouldn't have mentioned the Dark Lord by name, but Ben didn't seem to notice. He said, "I'm not saying to forgive and forget. I'm just saying it's a waste of energy."

Night was falling fast, and his face had become blurred by deepening shadow. Still, she felt his gaze piercing into her.

"Don't try to *convert* me," she snarled. "I'll never be one of your little Jedi friends."

Ben gave a sigh, deep and sad. For the first time, emotion came into his voice. "I know that, Ves. And I was stupid to try and make you a Jedi. But I don't think you're a Sith either."

Still the same, stupid, idealistic Ben. She'd been born a Sith, raised a Sith and would die a Sith. She'd accepted that long ago. Even in her period of wandering, stranded between the Lost Tribe and Krayt's, she'd never stopped considering herself Sith, just like Ben could never stop thinking of himself as a Jedi.

"*Sith* is my birthright," she said. "It's all I am. All I can ever be."

"Is it what you *want* to be?"

She wanted to say yes, of course, but stopped herself. "What I *want* doesn't matter, and never has."

For so long she'd wanted to please her father and Lady Rhea, and after that she'd wanted to place Ben. Did she *want* to please Krayt now? No. She obeyed because he terrified her. She no longer knew what she wanted. A part of her had simply *stopped* wanting because she never got what she desired anyway.

Ben seemed to examine her in the dark. After a while he said, "Yes, you don't have a master any more. The Lost Tribe is gone. The One Sith is somewhere out there, probably, but they're not here now. Right now, you can do whatever you want."

She grunted, said nothing.

Ben stretched out his legs and lay back. "Right now, I'm going to sleep. Like I said, I've got no place to go, so if you want to rest too, be my guest. You definitely need it."

"Don't act concerned about me."

Ben froze and looked at her for a long time. He said, "It's not *act*, Ves."

Then he lay flat on the rock, face toward the stars, and didn't move.

Vestara sat there for a long time, watching him, waiting for him to try... something. It was very dark now, but she thought she could see the slow, regular breathing of deep sleep. Her eyelids were very heavy. Even her limbs felt like they wanted to melt into the black stone beneath her. She scooted back until her back rested against a chunk of rock. Still facing Ben, she relaxed her body. She tried to stay vigilant, tried to keep her attention on Ben, but her body was too weak. The blackness of night stretched out and consumed her.

She awoke to fresh sunlight and birdsong.

Her eyes popped open and her body jerked upright. Ben was sprawled out in front of her, apparently still fast asleep. Morning light slanted across the treetops and the rock, carving deep shadows in the peak of the distant volcano. The light made Ben look old and withered, but also peaceful.

A pair of birds skipped across the edge of the rock, picking at the small patches of green moss on its underside. When Vestara moved two pairs of tiny black eyes reared up to look at her. Each bird was about half as long as her arm, with additional tail-feathers trailing another half-arm length. Their breasts were white, their backs green, their wings brown. Just as Ben had said, those tails shimmered with a full spectrum of colors. Smaller crests with the same multi-color brilliancy flared on top of their heads.

Vestara moved a leg, and both bursts burst into the sky with a flutter of wings. Ben sat up, stretched, and looked around.

"So," he asked, "Any plans for breakfast?"

"No poultry, apparently," Vestara said.

"I guess its back to fruit then." Ben rose and stretched his limbs and back. Vestara forced herself to her feet and did the same.

After that, they went down into the forest again. They tried to keep moving in the same direction, with the goal of circumnavigating the entire island. The task might take another day or it might take a week. At the very least, they lost nothing

in exploration. Given that this was a young volcanic island, Vestara doubted it had any fauna besides birds and insects, which made opportunities for protein scarce. At one point they found a brush growing some kind of nuts. They didn't taste very good, but it was all they had, so they dropped them into pockets and kept moving.

The whole time, Ben stayed in front of her. He didn't object to that. He didn't ask for his lightsaber back, even in jest. He seemed, more than anything, like he was waiting for something. Vestara wondered if, even now, he was connected with his cousin through the Force. The thought of the Sword of the Jedi swooping out of the air to fight her was, frankly, terrifying, but she had to believe not even the Grand Master's son had that kind of power.

Maybe he was waiting for her to have some kind of conversion. If so, he was in for a long wait. It wouldn't do much good here anyway. Jedi and Sith were strangely irrelevant concepts when you were alone in the jungle, without the faintest touch of civilization.

After they'd covered maybe three kilometers, they found another bush with fruits and sat down to eat. By then the sun was higher in the sky, and more light shone through the multi-colored leaves overhead.

Ben was halfway through his first fruit when he shuddered and dropped it. For a moment he just stared blankly into space, juice-wet jaw hanging stupidly open.

"What is it?" Vestara snapped. "You felt something in the Force, didn't you? What happened?"

Slowly, his jaw clamped shut and his shock-wide eyes found focus on hers.

"Something... impossible," he said.

Chapter 20

Jesmin lay flat on her back with a face full of wiring. Her legs stuck out from beneath the console, one perfectly normal, the other still half-encased in a bacta-filled cast that covered most of her thigh. It was clunky but she seemed to get around for the most part. She said the pain from the stab wound itself was pretty minor so long as she didn't put too much weight on it, which was why she'd spent most of the day hobbling around on a thin plasteel crutch.

The rest of the time she was like this. It was enough to make Scut feel almost-grateful for the ministrations on his own leg wound.

After Jesmin fused the last breaker, she scooted out from beneath the console and sat upright. The interior of the long-range communications station at the base of the transmission tower was filled with a mix of techs: Alliance, Imperial, and Ferroan. There were no Yuuzhan Vong in this den of advanced technology except for the one crouched in front of her right now.

"Done?" Scut asked.

"Done." Jesmin picked her crutch off the ground and fumbled to get up. Scut rose to his feet, extended a hand, and helped pull her up. Jesmin wobbled and leaned on the crutch.

"You're lucky," she grunted. "You got better fast."

Scut glanced at his own leg. The Yuuzhan Vong *thing* that had been attached there had been removed just an hour ago and he was surprised by how easily and painlessly he was moving, despite the fact that he'd broken a bone and all Jesmin had

suffered was a flesh wound. He probably owed Kodra Val some gratitude.

"Lucky," Scut said, "Isn't quite the word I'd use."

"Okay, okay," Jesmin admitted. "But you're back in action. Ready to roll."

"I'm not sure where we're rolling *to*," Scut looked around the busy station.

Drikall was speaking with some grey-haired Ferroan engineer while Sharr was talking to the Magister and a pair of Imperial techs on loan from *Vindicator*. Huhunna was apparently outside, putting her Wookiee tree-climbing skills to use by scaling the hundred-meter-tall transmission tower and checking for damage. She, too, had healed fast.

"They don't really need us," Jesmin admitted. "I mean, Huhunna is useful, but the rest of us aren't top-notch communication techs. We're just busy hands."

"It's what they need to get this place up and running," said Scut.

"Yeah, I know. I just wish I could do something besides hobble on a crutch and fuse wires together."

"And get stabbed by a Sith. Don't forget that part."

"Kinda hard to," Jesmin sighed. "I wish we'd have brought Thaymes with us."

"I don't," Scut grunted.

Jesmin frowned. "He *is* our comm wizard."

"He also can't stop making stupid jokes. Besides, they needed him to fix the long-range transceiver on *Starless*."

"I hope they're okay. All of them."

Scut knew she was worried about everyone, but Myri Antilles especially. Jesmin had known Myri since they were five years old, and it would be particularly cruel to lose her old friend, get her back, then lose her again days later.

"I think this is where the Jedi tell us to trust the Force," Scut said.

"Well, right now we've got one Jedi MIA and the other two up and left in the middle of the night."

Scut looked at her but he said nothing.

Jesmin sighed. "No, I didn't suddenly unlock extra-special Jedi powers since coming here." She gave the cast on her leg a

soft *whack*. “If I did, I wouldn't have gotten by butt kicked by a Sith, would I?”

She tried to make a joke of it, but Scut could see her disappointment. She clearly didn't want to dwell on it, so she asked, “What about you? I know you've learned all sorts of new things since coming here.”

“It's overwhelming,” he admitted. “The knowledge here, the thing I learned just from a few conversations with Qelah Kwaad and Kodra Val, are so beyond the textbook summaries I've been working with in the Alliance. It's like having everything you ever wanted, right at your fingertips, and you can't decide what to grab first.”

“Well, well,” she smiled, “Sounds like somebody's in love.”

“No I'm not. This place is still very alien, culturally.” Suddenly embarrassed, he shook his head. “It's just... well, no. Never mind.”

“C'mon, what is it? What are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking...” He hesitated. “Once this is all over, I might want to stay here.”

Jesmin didn't seem surprised. Scut had always had a complicated relationship with his birth race, at once fascinated and appalled, and Zonama Sekot presented him with all the bio-technological wonders of the Yuuzhan Vong, but with a tamed version of their often-savage culture.

“I'm glad,” she smiled a little melancholy smile. “Have you talked to Voort about it?”

“Haven't had time.” He shook his head. “But let's be honest. The Wraiths will adapt without me. It's a rag-tag unit. It draws different skills from a whole collection of misfits and it's usually a miracle the squad works together as well as it does.”

“Sounds about right,” Jesmin admitted.

“Hey, what are you two standing around, looking all thoughtful for?” Sharr's voice clapped behind them.

They both spun around and stiffened to attention. Scut said, “Sorry, boss. I won't try to be thoughtful, ever again.”

“Good,” Sharr nodded. “Never think too hard. It makes your brain hurt.”

“Where did the Magister go?” Jesmin asked. She didn't see the blond woman anywhere in the comm center.

"She had to take a private call," Sharr shrugged.

"Is Huhunna still out there, climbing around?" Scut asked.

"Yes, and I think she's enjoying it. But she won't for much longer. We've got another storm on its way."

Jesmin sighed. Ever since the jump to hyperspace, Zonama Sekot's weather patterns had gotten erratic. The temperature had risen, then tumbled almost to freezing point, then looked set to rise again with this new storm.

"How does it look?" Scut asked. "Do you think we can broadcast soon?"

"Everything looks good so far. And unlike the engines, we don't have to rely on the whims of the planet to pump out of beacon. So the techs say, anyway."

It sounded like good news, but Sharr didn't look enthused.

Jesmin asked, "What is it?"

"Well, there's a tricky part," Sharr planted his hands on his hips. "You see, we don't know where we are. Somewhere in the Unknown Regions, but we still can't match the stars in the sky with anything in our charts. Which means that even if Trinity Fleet is still where we left them, we don't know where that is."

"So you'll send a broad-range signal," Scut said. "Are you afraid it won't be powerful enough?"

"Oh, this thing is powerful," Sharr said. "That's actually kind of the problem."

"I don't understand," Jesmin frowned.

"We're sending out a big burst of noise," Scut told her. "It'll be loud enough for anyone to hear for hundreds of lightyears. *Anyone*, not just Trinity."

"But I thought it was encrypted."

"The message is encrypted, but they'll still hear the signal," Sharr said. "They'll be waiting for it, and they'll be able to trace its source pretty easily."

"So in other words, when we turn that thing on, everybody's going to come rushing our way."

"Exactly. So we'd better hope and pray Trinity Fleet gets here before Daala or True Honor."

"What about the planet?" asked Scut. "It already defended itself once."

"The Magister is... uncertain whether it'll do it again." They fixed Sharr with inquiring stares, but he just shrugged. "Sorry, I don't get to speak to living planets. Way outside my rank and privilege."

"We don't *have* rank," Jesmin reminded. "Or privilege."

"Exactly."

Scut spotted a blonde head pop out of one of the side doors. The Magister made her way directly toward them.

"Incoming, seven o'clock," he muttered.

Sharr turned around and waved the woman a greeting. Danni Quee gave Scut and Jesmin short nods, then told them, "I'm going to be going now. I'm needed at the village."

"You sure you can beat the storm?"

"Our fliers are fast. However, I recommend you pull everyone from outside duties. We don't know how fierce this one will be."

"No problem. Safe flying."

The Magister nodded and went for the door. Sharr turned back to Scut and Jesmin, shrugged again, and said, "See, I'm just a middle man. A *peon*, if you will."

"Nobody ever takes us seriously," Jesmin shook her head.

"It would really be better if we had rank. And privilege."

"You bet. I want a uniform. They'll take us seriously then. I want boots and rank badges. And a squad insignia with an Ewok on it."

"And epaulets. Don't forget epaulets. And a cape. And maybe a neat little hat. With a ribbon on top."

"Yeah, they'll really take us seriously then."

Scut rolled his eyes and groaned. "*Please* stop talking like Thaymes."

Rain was already starting to fall as the Magister's nimble flier settled down over the landing field. When she stepped outside, spray blew in Danni Quee's face on gusts of hot wind. She looked to the west and saw dark clouds billowing high in the sky. Lightning sparked and echoed deep within the clouds, and thunder rolled across the open field.

She went hurriedly for the edge of the landing zone. Waiting for her were a pair of Ferroans flanking a figure whose thin,

hunched shape was mostly shrouded by the cloak he wore. Though a hood was pulled over his head, it bulged with the turban Harrar wore over his head to signify his rank as a priestess of Yun-Harla.

With wind blowing and a storm approaching, there was no reason for the priest to come out and greet her personally, but Danni was not surprised that he had. Despite his age and infirmities, Harrar maintained an active life and frequently consulted with her over all manner of topics.

Not for the first time, Danni thought to the horrible days she had spent captive in the ice-tunnels of Helska 4. Her first experience with the Yuuzhan Vong had been horrifying, and she'd have never believed it possible that, twenty years later, she would be their *leader*, and their high priest would be her greatest friend.

"Welcome," Harrar said as Danni got close. He extended both hands she took them firmly, squeezing them by the wrists. "Was your flight safe?"

"A little windy, but we were okay," Danni glanced over her shoulder at the looming storm-clouds. "Come on. Let's get inside."

"Of course," Harrar said, and took one hand away. He led her onto the downhill trail leading into the village.

"I tried to come as soon as you called," Danni explained. "There was a little delay getting the flier prepped."

"It is all right," Harrar said. "They are waiting for you in your daumutek."

"*They*," she repeated. "Can you explain who *they* are exactly? Did Jaina and Tahiri come back? Did they find Ben?"

Harrar's head wagged from side to side. "They did not go to find Ben Skywalker."

Danni frowned. When the two of them had woken her up an hour before dawn and begged for a flier, she'd assumed that they had somehow located Ben Skywalker. Perhaps Sekot had told them, or perhaps they had used the Force to locate him themselves somehow. Danni didn't know if it was possible, but she didn't rule it out.

The years when Danni thought she could be a Jedi were long behind her. Despite being on Zonama Sekot for over a decade,

she was still a novice in the Force, and she always would be. Acceptance of that fact had been bittersweet, but necessary. She was old enough to have plenty of regrets, but plenty of things she was proud of too. Most of the time, the latter outnumbered the former and she was okay with that.

The wind started to come in earnest as they moved through the village lanes. Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroan alike scampered for cover. Lances of water fell down hard, pounding at her covered shoulders. When they reached her daumutek, the two Ferroan escorts moved beneath exterior awnings, letting Danni and Harrar go into her quarters alone. It felt wrong to leave them out in the rain, but Harrar nudged her forward, a little impatient. Whatever was going on, she was about to find out.

She stepped into her quarters and Harrar followed. The priest pulled back the hood of his cloak while Danni brushed some of the water off her jacket. At the far end of the room, sitting cross-legged on the floor in a low domed alcove, were three figures, two on the sides facing the one in the middle. To the left was Tahiri, to the right Jaina. In the middle was a male human, brown-haired, head bowed. Though she could not see his face, the shape of his shoulders and the color of his hair reminded her of a young man she'd first met almost twenty years back, in the ice caves of Helska 4.

"Is it you, Sekot?" she asked. The living world had barely spoken to her lately, despite the mounting crises she faced. She'd be lying if she said she didn't feel resentment, but she'd forgive Sekot in an instant if it would help her now.

But the figure said, "No. It's not."

He lifted his head. It was Jacen Solo, yes, but neither the Jacen Solo she remembered, nor the Jacen-simalucrum Sekot sometimes spoke through. This Jacen looked older by a decade or more. His eyes were sunken and his pale skin seemed drawn down by gravity. Even with her limited Force senses, she could feel this man blazing like a bonfire.

She stared. There was no sound save the pounding of rain on her roof.

"Hello, Danni." The man gave a tired smile. "I never thought I'd see you again."

She froze three meters away from the Jedi. She knew Sekot had summoned the ghost of Mara Jade Skywalker, but she'd never imagined such an appearance could be so vivid. She'd heard Force-ghosts described as blue blurs, but Jacen seemed as real as Jaina or Tahiri. He even cast a shadow.

"I'm not a ghost," he told her. He put out both hands and rapped his knuckles on the floor. She noticed for the first time that he had metal stun cuffs on his wrists.

"I don't understand," Danni looked to Tahiri, then Jaina. Both women wore grim expressions, but through the Force she could sense the same swarm of emotions she felt.

If anything, theirs was a worse storm. Danni had known Jacen was dead for years, but had only recently come to understand that he had not died heroically, as she'd assumed, but had been killed by his own sister after becoming a murderous Sith lord.

Until a few days ago, Jacen Solo been one of those regrets she could work around. Then he'd become a source of bitter pain. She couldn't help but wonder if she could, in some small way, have done something that would have prevented his awful fate. And now he was sitting in her living room, looking up at her with a slanted Solo smile and unhappy eyes.

"I don't understand," she repeated. When the Jedi didn't reply she looked at Harrar. "How did this happen?"

"The ways of the Gods are beyond me," the priest said. "However, it seems they have seen fit to return a hero."

Jaina snorted at the word but said nothing. She couldn't even look at her brother, though he was sitting right beside her. Danni's heart went out to the woman; whatever pain and confusion she was feeling must be nothing compared to what Jaina was going through.

"I'm not a hero," Jacen said. "Maybe I was, once, but I stopped being one a long time ago."

"I've stopped trying to understand how Sekot does things," Danni said. "I'm still trying to figure out why. But that might be stupid too."

"Don't," Jacen said softly. "*Why* is the most important thing."

"No it's not," Tahiri said. "With *why* you can justify anything."

Jacen nodded acceptance. "You're right. You can. I have." He fixed his eyes on Danni. "I guess they've told you everything about me. I won't bother to deny it. I've been a lot of things, but never a liar."

Jaina snorted again, though this time it sounded more like a growl.

"All right," Jacen admitted. "I'm a liar, a murderer, and a traitor. I'm probably the last being who deserves a second chance at life, but that's what Sekot's given me and I don't intend to waste it."

His voice was soaked in bitterness and self-loathing, but also with a kind of acceptance, as though Jacen was *okay* with all the awful things he'd done, all the pain he'd delivered to his loved ones. As though all the terror he'd wrought had been justified.

The Jacen she'd known had been curious and caring. He'd shied away from physical violence and had always sought peaceful solutions to every problem. He'd also been restless, always seeking new ways to experience the Force and grow closer to the deeper truths of the universe.

This was not the Jacen she'd known, the one she'd come close to loving. This man was a stranger in Jacen's shell, and seeing him broke her heart. She wished he had stayed dead, so she wouldn't have to look in those haunted eyes. She felt even more pain for Jaina and Tahiri, for they had been forced to watch as the Jacen she'd known had become the Jacen in front of her now.

"What are you going to do?" It was a struggle to keep her voice from wavering. She felt like she was going to weep.

"There is a man coming to Zonama," Jacen said. "All the pain I've wrought is nothing compared to what he's going to bring. Everything I've done has been to stop him."

"Is he a Sith?"

Jacen nodded. "For a long time he was a phantom that haunted dreams. But now he is real, and he is coming here. And I am going to stop him, once and for all."

Danni swallowed. She'd just been told that when they fired up the beacon to summon Trinity Fleet, they'd most likely summon Daala and True Honor as well.

"Can you protect Zonama Sekot?" she asked. She was still Magister, even if Sekot wouldn't speak to her, and she had a duty to protect her people.

"Even if it kills me," Jacen said. "I love this place more than anyone."

Love. It was not the word she expected from a man who had brought so much evil. But she could see in the intensity of his expression that yes, he did love this place, and was willing to die to protect it. In that sense, he still resembled the Jacen she had known.

"Do you know *how* yet?"

Jacen shook his head. "Sekot says it can only keep my body and spirit paired when I'm on Zonama. If I try to leave the planet, I'll fade away again."

"That means the Sith are coming *here*," Jaina spoke at last. "And we have to be ready for them."

"How?" Danni asked. "We have hardly any weapons on Zonama."

"What about the warrior caste?" Jacen asked.

"A lot of them are with the rogue Yuuzhan Vong fleet, working with the Sith," Tahiri said. "But there are still some here, especially the ones who worship the new god, the Ganner. They're very pro-Jedi."

Amusement broke through Jacen's mask. "The Ganner?"

"That's right," Tahiri nodded. "There's another cult based on Yu'shaa, or as we knew him, Nom Anor."

Something flicked across Jacen's face, a tender memory, softening it further. "Ganner died for me. I'll try to do right by his legacy."

"So is this what you intend?" Harrar asked. "To raise an army and fight against the Sith?"

"Unless someone has another option," Jacen looked at the two Jedi.

"Sekot defended itself a few days ago," Jaina said. "It struck out with the Force and destroyed an attacking fleet."

"Could it do so again?" Jacen asked intently.

Again Danni had a painful reminder of the young man who'd once begged Sekot not to fight the Yuuzhan Vong with physical violence.

"You'll have to ask Sekot," Jaina said simply.

Jacen pondered that. His expression went back to harsh, cold, calculating, and very determined. This was not the man Danni had known, but she felt like she could trust him with her life. A look at Tahiri and Jaina showed they did not feel the same way, probably because they had seen first-hand what this new Jacen was capable of.

"Sekot isn't always... forthcoming," Danni said. "Right now we'll have to make plans without its guidance."

She heard Harrar intake breathe, like he wanted to argue on Sekot's behalf, but the priest said nothing.

Danni said, "We've just about repaired the beacon that will call Trinity Fleet back to us. However, there's not way to keep the Sith or Admiral Daala's fleet from picking up the signal."

"*Daala's* out there too?" Jacen frowned. "Is she working with the Sith?"

"Daala wants to exterminate all Yuuzhan Vong," Jaina said. "And she's no friend of the Sith either."

"Interesting," Jacen grunted, like he was already considering some alliance with the old hawk-bat.

"The point is, we need a plan of defense," Jaina said. "We don't know which fleet will get here first, so we can't rely on Jag to keep Daala off our backs."

"Jag?" Jacen blinked. "Jagged Fel?"

"Commander of a joint Alliance-Imperial-Chiss fleet," Jaina said. "Also, my husband."

"Husband," Jacen repeated, and his stern mask wavered. His voice cracked as he said, "Congratulations."

"Thank you." Jaina's voice was brittle. She still couldn't look at him.

"If Sekot won't help us defend ourselves, it's going to be difficult," Danni said. "We have plenty of ships, but none of them have weapons attached."

"Then we fight them on the ground," Jacen said.

"Not if they try and pound us from orbit," Tahiri said.

"No," Jacen said firmly, "The Dark Man is coming here. Sekot can *feel* it. Otherwise it wouldn't have summoned me."

"You could end up fighting him on the burnt-out corpse of a dead world," Jaina said.

"If that's what I have to do, then I'll do it."

The cold, ruthless determination in his voice made Danni shudder. At some moments she could almost believe the Jacen she'd known was lurking behind that pale angry mask, but then he'd go and say something like that.

"This would all be *much* easier," she said, "If Sekot would tell us what it's thinking."

"Be patient," said a voice behind her. Everyone spun to see a small boy with shaggy dirty-blond hair standing in front of the closed door. Nobody dared speak, and Danni realized that the rain had stopped pounding on the roof.

"Sekot," Jacen said. "I'm glad you're here. We need your help."

"And I need yours," the boy looked straight past Danni, as though Jacen were the only thing in the room that mattered. He likely was.

"I told you, I'll do everything I can to protect this place," said Jacen firmly.

"I trust that," the boy said "But I want to talk to you about other things too."

Jacen spread his hands as much as the stun cuffs would allow. "Then take a seat and we'll talk."

"No," the boy shook his head. "I want to talk alone."

"Should we leave?" asked Harrar, reverence in his voice.

"You don't have to. I'd like to take Jacen for a walk."

Jaina stiffened and put a hand on one of her lightsabers. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"What am I going to do?" Jacen asked pointedly. "Where do you think I can run?"

"I don't know. You're always full of surprises."

"He may escape you, but he can't escape *me*," Sekot said. "Please, Jaina. Trust me if you can't trust your brother."

Jaina stiffened, and her face twisted in a bitter scowl, but she relented.

"Take him then. He's yours."

"Thank you," Jacen said curtly.

He unfolded his legs and rose to his feet. As he walked for the door he passed Danni. Their eyes met and for a moment the cruel determination left his eyes.

"For what it's worth," he said, "It's good to see you. I'm glad you and Harrar are okay."

Just for a moment, she sensed his honest concern. It was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She looked away and closed them, and listened to Jacen's footsteps as he went out the door, stepped through, and closed it tight behind him.

She looked up. An ominous silence hung in the room and no one would meet each other's eyes.

"Oh, Jaina," Danni groaned. "I am so, so sorry."

"Don't feel sorry for me," Jaina said grimly. "Feel sorry for Mara and the other people he killed."

"I feel sorry for *him*," Tahiri said softly, mostly to herself. "Sorry for what he used to be."

To that, no one dared object.

The rain had just barely stopped. The earth remained damp and slippery beneath his feet, and the rich scent of ozone still hung in the air. As Sekot led him into the forested hills surrounding the village, strong winds would rustle the tree overhead, shedding sprays of water from bora leaves that tickled his face. The air itself was humid and comfortably warm, and thick with all the forest's smells of growth and decay.

The sensations of the natural world were astonishing to Jacen, who had forgotten them a long time ago. Every droplet of water that splashed on his cheek felt a slightly different, and he tried to savor every touch. Every branch, twig, and leaf that scratched his skin or poked through the legs of his jumpsuit was startlingly different.

Of course, Sekot had not pulled him out of the daumutek just so he could enjoy nature.

"Are you taking me somewhere specific?" he asked the boy walking ahead of him.

"We're just about there," Sekot said.

Water did not seem to darken the boy's tunic or cling to his hair, and he left no footprints behind in the mud. Just a moment ago, Sekot had given itself form and become visible to Harrar, but now it seemed to have dropped that form and remained image only, without Jacen sensing a thing. It was just another

example of the living world's incredible power, and he felt humbled by it.

They passed through a cluster of thick brush, which Jacen did his best to push aside with both hands still bound. He thought about asking Sekot to unshackle him- it surely could if it wanted- but decided against it. It would only increase the distrust between himself and Jaina, which was already too high. Not that he blamed anyone but himself for that.

After he cleared the brush he saw the boy sitting on a large boulder and facing the lake spread out beyond. Jacen walked up to the boulder and looked out across the water. The surface was largely still, though a few occasional waterdrops sent rippled across a face that otherwise acted as a perfect mirror of the overcast, cloudy sky above.

"Is this it?" he asked.

The boy nodded but kept watching the water.

Jacen looked around. He saw a few trees rustle in the distance, probably with the weight of birds or small mammals. Otherwise, the lake and the clearing were peaceful and still.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Sekot said, "I killed a lot of people recently. I'm not sure how I feel about that."

The words sounded so strange from the mouth of a young boy, but they were in fact those of something much older, stranger, and more powerful.

He wanted to tell Sekot killing was never easy, but that was wrong. Toward the end of his life, Jacen had gotten very used to killing. He'd killed Lieutenant Tebut, one of his best officers, in front of his entire crew. He'd snapped the neck of Prince Isolder, a good man he'd admired and considered almost a father-in-law, with barely any thought. He could only imagine how much Tenel Ka hated him for that, on top of everything else he'd done to her.

So instead he said, "You did what you had to. It was justified."

"Was it?" the boy looked at him. Those green eyes seemed so sensitive, so vulnerable, so *human*. "Because I think I may have to do it again."

"You'll be protecting yourself and the people you love. There's no shame in that."

"I remember you told me something very different once."

"That was a long time ago."

"You were afraid I would fall to the dark."

"Light and dark are meaningless distinctions. You exist beyond them. You touch a more unifying version of the Force."

The boy looked skeptical. "And you?"

"I have... done things traditionalists would consider part of the dark," he admitted.

"And did it make you better?"

"It made me stronger," he said firmly.

"But did it make you *better*? Did it make you happier? Did it make you love deeper, feel more strongly? Did it bring you any closer to touching the Unifying Force?"

"No," he admitted. "But I learned I never could, not again. I accepted that. And I realized I had to do something *else* with the powers I had. I needed to use them to help the galaxy instead of just myself. The Sith offered me a path I hadn't found any place else."

"And so you turned yourself Dark to save the galaxy and defeat your Dark Man?"

"Yes. Exactly. I did it because only I could, no one else."

"Is the galaxy saved? Did you defeat your Dark Man?"

Sekot already knew the answer, and the boy's voice held soft condemnation. Jacen felt a spike of shame and looked away.

"At least I tried," he said, and knew it was a weak excuse. "The Jedi huddled in their temple and prayed while the galaxy fell apart, because the situation didn't fit their easy views on right and wrong. *Someone* had to save things."

"You saved nothing, Jacen Solo. Not even yourself."

That was a different voice: Soft, sly, feminine, and familiar. Jacen's heart pounded in his chest and he looked at the rock. The boy was gone. He looked out across the lake and saw it standing with three-toed feet resting on the motionless surface of the water. Its feathered body rested on reverse-articulated legs and two teardrop-shaped eyes looked at him with deep curiosity.

He saw it, and he felt *her*. The sensation made him stagger a step back. This was not another of Sekot's projections standing on the water before him.

It was Vergere herself.

He stared, and she stared back. He had no idea what to say. He'd wished he could speak with his mentor countless times since her death on Ebaq 9. During his transformation into Darth Caedus he'd been half-convinced she *was* talking to him, though they could just as well have been the mutterings of his own addled mind.

Now she was in front of him and he was speechless.

When she spoke, her voice was very sad. "In the story of your life, was this your best ending?"

Her disappointment hurt him more than Jaina's glares, Tahiri's scowls, Danni's withheld tears.

He said, "I did what you taught me to do. I embraced my pain, I used my anger, all to save the galaxy. I was your gardener, cutting out the weeds so the flower could grow. What did I do wrong?"

"Do you *really* need to ask that?" she said.

"I know I did things, awful things. I'm not proud of what I did to Mara, and Ben, and Tahiri. But my cause, my goal, was right. It was what you made me to be all those years ago."

"I did not die just so you could burn half the galaxy, be killed by your sister, and leave a giant mess behind," Vergere snapped.

"I don't understand," he protested. He felt like a scolded child, which was shameful, but he couldn't help it. "Isn't this what you wanted? Isn't this what you and Lumiya spent so much time planning for?"

Vergere's crest flared, bright red feathers jutting up to a lead-gray sky. "Lumiya? You mean your Sith master?"

"Of course," he said, even more confused. "You and she planned my ascension, together. You both made me—"

Vergere shook her head, suddenly sad. "Oh, Jacen. Were you *that* desperate to believe?"

"Desperate? Desperate for what?"

"*More*," Vergere said. "Always, you have sought out more. Greater powers, vaster knowledge, a deeper connection with the Force that transcends all the boundaries laid down by the Jedi. It's been your greatest strength and greatest weakness."

"Lumiya lied to me, then?"

He felt shock deep inside, and knew he shouldn't. Even when he'd been trained by Lumiya he'd distrusted her every word, and even tried to kill her. After she'd sacrificed herself for him, so like Vergere, he'd come to miss her, even accept her more specious statements as fact.

Vergere's feathers fluttered as she sighed. "I did meet Lumiya. That much of what she told you was true. After the death of my master Elan, but before I returned to the Yuuzhan Vong, I sought out Force-users not connected with the Jedi Order, ones who might provide a different perspective on the war. I spent some time with Lumiya, who had herself a fleet to combat the invaders. I found her curious, but very sad."

"Sad?" Jacen could think of many words for the Dark Lady of the Sith, but that didn't leap to mind.

"Sad," Vergere nodded. "A being more machine than woman, and twisted so much by her loss she no longer understood the reason behind her actions. She told me of her plans to bring down Luke Skywalker's Jedi Order. She thought you and your brother both likely candidates. That, I admit, is where I first learned of you."

She sighed again. "But she was too broken, as I said, both in body and mind. I decided she would not suit my purpose, so I left her to her own devices and sought you out."

"Your purpose?" Jacen echoed. "And what was *that*?"

"You already know, Jacen. I spent fifty years among the Yuuzhan Vong, and in half a century I could not solve their mystery. If I, with my Jedi training, couldn't do it, I knew I would need help from someone different. Unique. Someone who could be both my student, and my teacher."

"Me," Jacen said.

"You," she nodded.

Jacen stared at her, at the still lake-water, at the billowing dark clouds overhead. It was true that, in claiming to be Vergere's partner, Lumiya had laid the first stepping stone for Jacen's path toward Sith-hood. Not only had it touched on his love for his dead mentor, but it had fed his desire to be part of something bigger, greater, *more*.

But if experience had shown he could not trust Lumiya, it had also shown he could not trust Vergere.

"Everything I tell you is a lie," he repeated her maxim.

"And the truth," she said.

Jacen felt like laughing and crying at once. Maybe Vergere was lying *now*, and Lumiya had spoke true. Maybe it was the other way around. Maybe *both* were lying. He felt lost in a swirl of possibilities, and he couldn't decide if any were more or less terrible than the next.

One truth that stood out now, against everything Lumiya and Vergere had ever told him. In the story of his life, Darth Caedus was not the best ending.

"I tried to do what was *right*," he said weakly, falling back on his old refrain. It sounded sick, even to him. "Everything I did was for the good of the galaxy, everything. Even killing Mara, torturing Ben, twisting Tahiri, *all* of it."

She shook her head sadly. "What happened to the curious young man, the one who wanted to learn every aspect of the Force? When did you become a fanatic?"

Maybe that was the most important question of all. Somewhere on his journey from a bright-eyed animal-loving Jedi apprentice on Yavin 4 to Darth Caedus, he'd lost the sense of wonder for life he'd once had. It wasn't Anakin's death that had done that, or Vergere's teaching, or Lumiya's.

"I know," he rasped, to himself as much as Vergere's shadow.

"When?" she asked.

He swallowed. The air was wet but his throat was brittle and dry. "When I saw *him*. The Dark Man that's coming."

Vergere's head canted. "Describe him."

"You don't already know?"

"Death did not grant *you* omniscience. Why should I have gotten it?" Vergere bristled. "Tell me."

"I had a... a vision. Call it a vision. It wasn't the future. It was a metaphor *of* the future. I saw a man on a dark throne, surrounded by acolytes. He was human but he wore the armor of the Yuuzhan Vong. He had one red eye, like a Sith, and another blue one. And he had... tattoos, black tattoos on what I could see of his face."

"Go on," Vergere said urgently.

"I saw two people standing by his throne, one on either side. One was a man, an angry-looking man with curly blond hair. I

didn't feel anything from him, but when I saw the other one I knew I had to protect her."

"Her?"

"It was Allana. My daughter. I didn't know it then, Allana didn't even exist. But I knew our fates were connected. I knew I had to protect her and it was probably going to get me killed."

He blew out a long breath. He'd carried this secret with him for many years, and he felt like he was letting go of a great burden at last. He hadn't told it to Jaina or Tenel Ka or Luke, but to Vergere he could say it.

"*That* was when I lost my... wonder," he said. "I knew I couldn't afford to be wide-eyed any more. I had to choose, act, and do whatever I could to stop the Dark Man."

He stared at Vergere, challenging her to find fault in his choice. Her specter stood there on the lake's mirror-surface, staring back. Finally, she pronounced, "You failed."

He opened his mouth to appeal, but could not. He'd known it ever since his last talk with Luke in the Lake of Apparitions. Every good intention and terrible deed was rendered moot by that simple fact.

Instead of rebuking him further, Vergere sighed again and said, "I, too, am familiar with failure. And I have had to live with it, as it were, even in death."

"What do you mean?" Jacen frowned.

"Before I found you I found Lumiya," Vergere said, "But do you think *she* was the first?"

It stung Jacen's ego to think Vergere had possessed other apprentices. It was petty and selfish, but he had to admit it. Still, he couldn't figure out how or when. She'd spent fifty years among the Yuuzhan Vong, and surely couldn't have trained anyone then. Before that, best he knew, she was just a normal Jedi, not a Master who took on padawans.

But from her tone, her expression, he knew *when* wasn't the real question.

"Who?" he asked.

"A Jedi," she said. "He was a survivor of the Clone Wars, and was taken captive by Yuuzhan Vong scouting parties. They placed him in the Embrace of Pain, much like you. Only where you learned to move beyond pain, he lost himself in it. He was

not a young man like you, but a Jedi Master who had great experience with anger and loss. In the end, the Embrace fed his natural rage.

"Yet I was intrigued by him. You understand, he was the first Jedi I had encountered in over a decade. Moreover, he was not the typical Jedi, all selfless nobility and stoicism. Oh no, he was a man who had unleashed all those parts of himself the Jedi taught him to hide away."

"He was a Sith?" Jacen asked, realization dawning.

"Not then. But he was fast on his way."

"The Dark Man," Jacen said.

"When I met him, he was A'Sharad Hett," Vergere pronounced, "Though he was already becoming something else. When I realized his potential for slaughter, but not understanding, I recommended the Yuuzhan Vong kill him. But of course, I was just a priestess's familiar, so they didn't listen."

"But you... *trained* the Dark Man."

"For a time I thought he was the one I was looking for." She shook her head. "What role I played in shaping the monster he became, I cannot say. Though I admit I may be partly responsible for his evil."

"And mine," Jacen said darkly.

"And yours," she acknowledged. "But you are not A'Sharad Hett. You had the gifts of wonder and understanding, as well as determination and violence. And, I believe, you still do."

"No," he growled, angry at Vergere, Lumiya, Hett, himself, the universe. "The good parts of me were burned out a long time ago."

She shook her head sadly. "No. I could sense them now. You have been too far away from Zonama Sekot, and too far from life. But you do remember, don't you?"

He looked up at the sky, and felt a single, fat drop of water roll off a leaf splatter his left cheek. It left a cool, tingling sensation on his skin and he didn't try and wipe it off.

"There is always hope for redemption," Vergere said. "Even for you. Even for me. It is the most wondrous gift of the Force."

"And for the Dark Man?" he asked.

"Who can tell?" she said. "Perhaps this is something you will have to teach me."

He looked down at the shackles on his hands. Their weight and their hard metal surface were constant reminders of the crimes he'd committed, and the hatred he'd earned from everyone who'd once loved him.

"No lesson is truly learned until it has been purchased with pain," he pronounced.

"There has to be a better way," Vergere said softly.

"I never found one." Jacen said. He felt something else cool and wet on his cheek, and it was not rain.

"Neither have I," Vergere admitted. "But I hope all the pain you have been through has bought *some* lesson."

He looked down at the stun-cuffs, then up at the sky. "I think it has."

Vergere waited for more.

"I'm going to defend this world no matter what," he said. "And I will defeat the Dark Man, even if I have to die again. But I don't want to burn the whole planet down for that to happen. I'm willing to sacrifice myself, but not everyone else."

She said nothing, still waiting.

"Sekot is willing to strike out with the Force and destroy its attackers, but when it does, it will strike out in anger and hate. I don't want that to happen. This place, the people in it, deserve better."

"So you wish to defeat the Dark Man and protect the ones you love, without seeing them corrupted by the darkness within their own hearts?"

"Yes. And if you have any ideas how, I'm all open."

"Of course," A gentle smile blossomed on her face. "I was only waiting for you to ask."

Chapter 21

Almost forty hours had passed since Zonama Sekot hurled itself into hyperspace, leaving a confused and tattered fleet behind. In that time, the hyperdrive engines, sublight engines, and gun batteries on *Phoenix* had been repaired. Most of the crew from *Sunbeam* had been scuttled to other ships and her starfighters, shuttles, and important cargo spread across the fleet, bringing the support craft for *Starless* and *Corusca Gem* to near-original strength.

The more complicated issue was dealing with the True Victory crew. Some sixty percent of the people from *Phoenix* and *Sunbeam* had agreed to help crew the Trinity vessels, while the captains of *Lacentra* and *Niathal* had forsworn their pledge to annihilate Zonama Sekot and agreed to focus their attention to the Yuuzhan Vong renegade fleet and, if needed, Admiral Daala's ships. The people from *Sunbeam* were enough to bring *Phoenix* back up to full strength. Those officers who refused to comply were kept locked in crew quarters, under armed Chiss and Alliance guard. The remaining Chiss personnel and equipment had been relocated to *Corusca Gem* and *Vindicator* under the joint command of Wynssa Fel and those ships' respective captains. It was a strange arrangement, but thus far it has proceeded without incident.

And, most amazingly of all, Syal Antilles had gotten some sleep in.

Six hours wasn't as much as she would have liked, but it was far better than being wired on stims. So, after a decent sleep, shower, and mildly filling breakfast, she put her captain's uniform on and reported to her scheduling briefing with Jagged Fel. She reported on the repairs to the long-range communication antenna, and confirmed that they had not received any beacon signal from Zonama Sekot.

Fel, meanwhile, gave her a more detailed briefing on events in the fleet. Kre'fey's old admiral rank had been resurrected and he'd been placed on the bridge of *Phoenix*, where he was currently meeting with Aref'ja's secondary command staff and attempting to build a bridge of trust between the mixed Trinity and True Victory crews. Wynssa Fel had assembled a two-thirds-strength wing of Clawcraft flying out of *Vindicator*, while Verendet shuffled two squadrons of his TIEs to *Corusca Gem* to make room. *Gem*, meanwhile, had a belly full of fighters and was ready to fight when called on.

The only thing missing was a signal from Zonama Sekot. Fel tried to keep the emotion from his face when he said so, but Syal knew a thing about hiding your feelings behind a layer of professional detachment. He was easy to see through, but she didn't call him on it.

After the briefing, she stepped out of the chamber and made her way toward the bridge. It was a short walk and she wasn't expecting any surprises, but when she got close to the entry blast doors, a silver-and-pink flash popped out of the side corridor and stopped her in her tracks.

"Myri!" Syal jumped back a step. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, that's a great way to greet your little sis." Myri, leaning forward intently, seemed to hover over her older-but-shorter sister.

Syal glanced over her shoulder to make sure nobody was watching. "Is there something you need? I'm supposed to be on duty."

"Just a little something." Myri said. "I was wondering if you could talk to our cousin- ah, Commander Fel on my behalf. Well, not *my* behalf, but someone else's behalf. Someone I kind of owe a debt to."

Syal suddenly remembered what annoyed her about her sister. "And... whose behalf *would* this be one?"

Myri opened her mouth to say something, stopped, considered, and snapped her jaw shut. Then she opened it again and said, "There's a crew member on *Phoenix*. Right now she's being held in her quarters, even though she wants out."

"I imagine everyone is a cell wants out." Syal crossed her arms over her chest. "Aref'ja primary command staff is still in lockdown. So is anybody else Fel and Kre'fey thought might be a security risk."

"Yeah," Myri breathed. "She's one of *those*."

"A security risk? And you're *vouching* for her?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Myri said. "Her name is Miranda Fardreamer. She's a kid, probably still in her teens. She was an agent for True Victory and probably did some nasty stuff, which is why they're keeping her locked up."

"It sounds like they have a good reason."

"There's more to it than that. When they held me captive, I spent a lot of time talking to her. I got to know her."

"And you think she's a good person?"

Myri's mouth popped open, shut, then opened again. "I think she deserves a second chance."

"Myri, do you think she could be security risk?"

"No. I honestly don't. I think this girl needs to do something besides sit in her cell all day and hate the universe."

"So you want me to release a bitter, angry teenage girl to Admiral Kre'fey's care? I doubt he'd appreciate that."

Myri sighed. "This girl has problems. She's been through a lot, Syal, stuff we can't even imagine. Her parents are dead, she has no friends or relatives, all she's got is a big bundle of hate inside. That's why she joined True Victory in the first place. But she has potential. She's smart, she's got skills, and she wants to do the right thing."

Syal still didn't feel like putting her name on the line in order to help out some dangerously unstable teenager. And it would be Syal's name on the line, no doubt about it. Myri probably hadn't thought that part through, but Myri rarely did.

"Please," Myri pressed. "She did good for me when I was captive. I want to do the same for her."

"And if I get Fel to release her, what will she do?"

"She was working as a tactical and comm officer on *Phoenix* during the last fight. And let's be honest, we still need every willing body on deck, especially if we're going to have another fight."

Syal sighed reluctance. Myri was still giving her the pleading eyes she'd once used on their mother.

"I can talk to Fel about it," Syal relented. "But I can't promise anything."

"Great!" Myri grinned. "By the way, this girl, Miranda, she also wants to meet Ben Skywalker, whenever we hook up with Zonama Sekot."

Syal sighed. "What is she, a Jedi fangirl?"

"I think she kind of hates him actually." Myri shrugged, as if to say, 'kids these days.' "But she stole his lightsaber the last time they met and she wants to give it back personally."

"She stole Ben Skywalker's *lightsaber*?"

"Yup." Myri nodded. "Told you she had skills."

Before Syal could say anything else, Myri patted her on the shoulder and said, "Thanks. Gotta run," and disappeared down a side corridor.

Syal stared at the wall in front of her for a moment, then turned around and marched back toward Jagged Fel's briefing room.

She still wasn't sure if she wanted to bring up the lightsaber.

Miranda Fardreamer stood in the center of the room and wondered if she should say something. She did her best to stare dead ahead at the pale gray bulkhead in front of her. Maybe she should have shifted her gaze and met his eyes, but there was something intensely unnerving about the gold-flecked violet of Admiral Kre'fey's stare.

Eventually the old Bothan said, "I gave your case a second review at the request of a fellow officer. I trust that officer's judgment, so I decided to look over your file. I have to admit it was interesting."

Miranda shifted her eyes onto the Bothan. She tried to focus her eyes on the white fur around his collar and not those piercing eyes.

“Frankly, I can see why you didn't pass the first round. You have no military training and have never held rank. You were recruited last-minute to work the command deck as an assistant to an assistant tactical office. Your specialty, apparently, was running dangerous courier missions for Admiral Aref'ja, including a recent one on Tatooine, where you killed a man, stole a Jedi's lightsaber, and had your own target stolen from under you. So in addition to having no skills that would help us in the battle ahead, you are also a killer and a foul-up.”

Kre'fey took a step closer and forced her to meet his eyes. “Is there anything you want to say in your defense?”

Miranda swallowed. “I just don't want to die in my bunk, sir.”

“You won't be dying at all, not if I have anything to do with it.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that, sir.” She licked dry lips and tried to focus her eyes on the white again. “Sir, I never served in the Alliance navy, but my parents did. My mother was killed at the first Battle of Fondor, just after I was born. My father died in the second.”

“And you honored the memory of their service by joining a renegade fleet bent on genocide?” he asked harshly.

Fishing for sympathy clearly wouldn't work. She said, “Admiral, I wanted to do something meaningful. Aref'ja presented me with an opportunity, so I took it.”

“So that's what you want to do then? Make an impact before you die?”

“Doesn't everyone, sir?”

“Jacen Solo made a great impact before he died. So did Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine. Do you want to make that kind of impact?”

“No, Admiral. I want to make things better. I want to be proud of what I've done.”

“And you thought destroying an entire alien race would make you feel proud, and ease the pain of your loss?”

“Honestly, Admiral, I did.”

She expected another scolding, but instead the Bothan's tone softened a little. “What changed?”

It was a good question, for which she didn't have an exact answer. There had been so singular turning point when she

realized she was on the wrong path. Being tricked by a Jedi on Tatooine. Long talks with a captive Myri Antilles. The dizzying carnage on *Phoenix's* bridge after Zonama Sekot's attack.

Mostly, though, it was that satisfied smile on Elscol Loro's face right before she died.

"It wasn't worth it," she said. "I decided that it wasn't worth it."

"*What* wasn't worth *what*?" Kre'fey pressed.

"All that effort, just to spread more death. It was wrong. Stupid." She licked her lips again and said, "I was letting my grief take me over. But there's more to life than grief."

Kre'fey took two steps back. "Well said."

Miranda blinked, and dared meet his eyes. "Admiral?"

"We can find a place for you on the bridge," the Admiral said. "You can work a comm station, can't you?"

"Yes, Admiral. Of course."

"Very well. I'll get you a brevet ensign rank, Fardreamer."

"Thank you, Admiral. Thank you so much."

"Don't make me regret it," Kre'fey gave a warning growl.

"You won't. I promise."

"I hope not." The Admiral still didn't sound convinced. She noticed a ripple run through his fur. He said, "Before you report to your station, there is someone else who would like to have a discussion with you."

"Admiral?" she frowned.

"Aref'ja has put in a request to speak with you. My guard will escort you to his chamber."

She no idea what to think. She muttered a "Yes, sir," as Kre'fey showed her out into the hall. Two guards in blue Alliance uniforms escorted her down the corridor, into a turbolift, and out onto one of the habitat decks. She still had no idea why Aref'ja would have wanted to speak to her.

She was shown into chambers much like the ones in which she had been confined, and Myri Antilles before her. Aref'ja himself was sitting on the edge of his bunk. His uniform was still tattered and dirty and his wounded arm was wrapped and cradled in a sling, but his fur seemed to have been washed and cleaned. The guards remained outside but kept the door open, giving them only limited privacy.

Aref'ja's head hung low, and he did not look up when Miranda stepped in front of him. She cleared her throat awkwardly, and he finally raised his head.

"Ah," he said. "They let you go."

"I'm to be a communications officer on the bridge," she told him. She couldn't help but feel like a traitor.

"That's good," he said tiredly. "I am, of course, to remain here. Assuming I survive this mission, I will stand trial. But I was aware of those risks going in."

He stopped speaking and lowered his head again. Aref'ja was Kre'fey's junior, but he seemed infinitely older at this moment. The gentleman-admiral persona with which he led the fleet had been totally worn away, leaving just a gray Bothan sagging in his tattered uniform.

Somehow, his pathetic state made Miranda feel even more guilty. She said, "I'm sorry, Admiral. I wanted to serve on the bridge again because I wanted to *do* something. I didn't want to stay trapped in my bunk when the rest of the crew needed help."

Aref'ja sighed. "You have nothing to apologize for. I do not consider you a traitor, Fardeamer. No, not at all."

He picked up his head again. His gold eyes were less fearsome than Kre'fey's, but felt just as hard to hold.

"I was very close to giving the order to fire, did you know that? I stood there, on the comm with Traest, and you were holding me up. I was dazed. Wounded. Very angry, not just at what had happened but at everything that had led me to that point. I was ready to die fighting. Then I looked in your eyes, and I changed my mind. So in a very real sense, Fardeamer, you have already saved the lives of your fellow crew."

The idea was staggering. She had no idea what to say.

Aref'ja continued, "I thought you should know that. I looked in your eyes and I decided you, and by extension the rest of my crew, did not deserve to die because of my thirst for revenge. Enough already have."

She managed a mumbled, "Thank you, sir."

Aref'ja gave a mirthless laugh. "You're quite welcome, Fardeamer. Or is it Ensign, still?"

"Ensign Fardeamer, sir."

“Fair enough. I was not even a Brevet Admiral, not really.” He sighed and lowered his head again.

She looked down on his hunched shoulders and ruffled silver fut and tried to think of something to say. She didn't want to end it like this, not after all she'd done for the man, and all he'd done for her.

She asked, “Is there anything I can do for you, Admiral? Is there anything you want at all?”

“You can stop calling me admiral.” He didn't look up. “As to what I want... In truth, Ensign, I'd like nothing more than a knife to stab the Yuuzhan Vong through the heart. But that's not realistic, is it? I suppose if I want anything, anything attainable, it would be the safety and survival of every being I dragged into my revenge fantasy.”

He looked up once more and locked gold eyes on hers. “Can you give me that, Ensign?”

“I'll do my best, sir.”

“That's all I ask.” He bore his canines in a Bothan smile.

Miranda stepped out into the corridor and heard the door hiss shut behind her. She took a deep breath of the recycled air and felt dizzy.

It was very strange, having something to live for.

There were lost in uncharted space in a battered fleet that could be exterminated at any moment by not one but two different enemies, and they'd already taken dire losses, but Myri Antilles still felt almost-sorta optimistic.

Maybe it came down to her good deed.

She hadn't heard anything about Miranda Fardreamer since passing her request on to Syal, but that itself had been enough. When you were as lost and helpless as they were aboard Trinity Fleet, it helped to remind yourself that you still give other beings the help they needed.

But a little optimism didn't counterweigh the rest of the mess they were in, so like the other Wraiths, Myri kept herself busy. The five of them left on *Starless* worked with the ships' deck crews to repair battle-damage on their StealthX fighters. The main and secondary hangars of the warship were, frankly, a mess, clogged with strewn entrails of damaged starfighters and

crammed with intact ships that had belonged to Trinity and True Victory capital vessels destroyed in Zonama Sekot's wave of destructive energy.

Piggy and Thaymes knew their way around the insides of a starfighter the best, and they ended up giving instructive lectures to Myri, Wran, and Turman as they patched up the engine, comms, shields, and weapon systems on their StealthX fighters.

Turman in particular seemed engrossed. He'd been the closest with Trey of anyone and he seemed to need the opportunity to take his mind off his dead friend. None of them had taken up conspicuous displays of mourning yet; they all knew the mission wasn't over and they could be called into combat at any time.

They also knew that half the Wraiths were on Zonama Sekot and maybe lost forever. The thought of never seeing Jesmin again, after a tiny hours-long reunion, threatened to kill Myri's optimism all together, and she did her best to tell herself that Jagged Fel would, certainly and inevitably, find the missing planet and save his wife and everybody else there too.

At one point, when they'd finished patching up Wran's X-wing and were marching down *Starless*' busy halls to the mess, Thaymes said, "Hey lead, whatever happened to the X-wings for Smarty's team?"

Myri almost stopped in her tracks with the realization that she hadn't thought of them at all since the fight. Five top-line StealthX fighters weren't something you let lie around.

Voort, though, said, "They got requisitioned. Some pilots from *Liberty Star* who lost their birds."

To Myri it felt, irrationally, like they were writing off Jesmin and the rest, but Turman said, "Glad they're getting used."

"We're not in the position to let resources lie around," Voort reminded.

"I figured it was something like that," Wran said. "Honestly, I'm kind of glad they didn't go to any True Victory pilots."

"Are they letting a lot of them fly?" Myri asked. *Starless*' hangars were mostly crammed with ships and pilots from lost Trinity Fleet ships, which made it easy to ignore everything that must have been happening aboard *Phoenix* and the two

True Victory Mon Cal ships.

"Like I said, we're not in the position to waste resources," Voort grunted.

"But can we trust them, really?" asked Wran.

"If we get into a fight I want some of *our* people on my wing," Thaymes muttered.

"They *are* our people," Myri said.

"They *were*."

"If we get into a fight, it'll probably be against the Vong," Turman reminded them. "And True Victory people want to kill them more than anything."

"Gee, I'm glad they'll get their wish," Wran said bitterly. "I'm still kinda hoping for, you some, some kind of apology for dragging us neck-deep into their own stupid pile of—"

"Captain on deck!" Voort snapped, just in time.

Everyone stopped and stiffened to attention, and lo and behold, there was Syal Antilles, uniform crisp and back straight as ever, still looking pretty authoritative even as she stood outside the doorway to the mess hall.

She nodded a little and said, "Thank you, Piggy. I just want to talk to Myri. The rest of you can go ahead."

The others Wraiths slipped through the doorway, leaving Myri to stand in the hallway with her sister.

"Well?" Myri asked. Her hands tightened to balls at her sides. She knew what this had to be about.

Syal, as usual, wasn't letting her feeling show on her face. She said, "I just got a message from Admiral Kre'fey."

"And?"

"He's reviewed Miranda Fardreamer's case. And he's decided to reinstate her brevet ensign rank and place her on the bridge."

"Oh," Myri felt dizzy for a second. "Oh, thank the Force."

"Thank Admiral Kre'fey."

"I will. I mean, let him know how grateful I am."

"I will," Syal said, but something in her tone said, *I hope we don't regret this.*

"I owed it to her," Myri insisted. "Miranda gave me some help when I needed it. I don't know if she meant to, or if she realized she was doing it, but I just wanted to repay the favor."

More than that, she owed some good deed to the memory of Elscor Loro. She hadn't told Syal, or anybody else, about what had happened between her and *Phoenix's* late captain. She didn't know where to begin.

But in a way, it didn't matter. What she *did* from here on mattered, and she figured what she'd done for Miranda was a pretty good start.

Myri blew out a breath; a stupid smile came unbidden to her face. She really did feel optimistic now.

"Hey," she said, "How's it holding up?"

"It?"

"*You*," Myri said. "How are *you*, holding up, sis?"

Syal blinked. "I got six hours of sleep today."

"See? Things are looking up all around. By the way, did Miranda get, you know, a full pardon?"

"It's a temporary move," Syal said. "We still haven't decided what we're going to do with all the True Victory members. We don't have time to—"

"I know that," Myri waved a hand. "I was just wondered if she got her stuff back. You know, personal affects."

Syal raised an eyebrow. "You mean Ben Skywalker's lightsaber?"

"Yeah, that thing."

"I think Admiral Kre'fey reinstated her rank and privileges from before. Whatever the means." Syal paused, then added, "I didn't tell the admiral about the lightsaber."

"Probably a good idea," Myri said. "Best if it's a surprise."

Syal got a look that said she didn't want any more surprises of any kind, ever, especially not from her sister.

Myri glanced through the doorway and saw the other Wraiths setting trays at one of the tables. She turned back to Syal and said, "Well, looks like I gotta bug out. Thanks for everything. Really."

Before Syal could respond, Myri leaned in and gave her big sister a quick kiss on the forehead, then ducked into the mess hall. She didn't turn around, didn't try to catch a glimpse of whatever expression was on Syal's face. Just imagining it was good enough.

Chapter 22

Jacen had just left the lake and started back toward the village when another storm came in. The rolling thunderclaps had been warning to wrap up his conversation with Vergere's spirit, but he didn't finish it soon enough to avoid the downpour.

When the rain came it came fast and hard, and it quickly turned the already-damp topsoil to dark muck that tried to suck in Jacen's boots with every step. To escape the rain he had to climb up onto the hard root of one bora tree, awkwardly keeping balance while both hands remained bound in front of him, while the earth beneath liquefied and churned before his eyes.

Against the pounding of the rain and the rasp (the good, painful rasp) of his own breathing, he heard another noise. At first he thought it was the scream of an animal; then he recognizing the cry of a person.

He reached out with the Force and felt panic, fear. Two people, both panicking, both afraid. He knew what that meant, but to be sure, he reached within himself and found the dark hole in himself where Vergere had once dug a Yuuzhan Vong seed implant whose nerves had grasped out and intertwined with his own. He found his Vongsense, like the Force but not, that let him tell the presence of some Yuuzhan Vong warriors, a half-dozen perhaps, almost certainly on the attack.

He remembered what Tahiri had told him as she flew him to the village, that the Sith woman who'd taken Ben had come with a squadron of Yuuzhan Vong warriors from the renegade fleet who had attacking the Ferroans and offworlders in the

village; some had been captured, but more had fled into the forest.

He heard something else, something lower and deeper. It took him a moment to put aside the rattle of rainfall and recognize the familiar hum and whirl of a moving lightsaber.

He could have stayed there, safe and halfway sheltered from the storm, but he heard the crackle of a lightsaber digging into yorik coral, and another scream.

Whether he'd been Jacen or Caedus or something else, he'd never just sat around and done *nothing*.

He used the Force to hurry his spring through the forest. He made his running bounds as long as possible, lifted his feet back up the moment they hit the surface of the liquefying mud.

He found them in less than a minute: two blonde women, calves halfway buried in mud, surrounded by six Yuuzhan Vong warriors. As he landed on the gnarled crest of a jutting tree root, he saw one warrior lunge forward and slam his amphistaff against Tahiri's lightsaber. As she tried to push back, another one swiped forward at Danni.

Danni Quee had never been a fighter of any kind; she barely dodged the blow but she had nothing to defend herself with and her feet were stuck in the mud. Another warrior leaped forward, roughly grabbed a fistful of gold hair, and threw her into the muck. As Tahiri tried to hold off two warriors at once, the others crowded around Danni, amphistaffs raised.

With a shout and a push from the Force, Jacen leaped into the air. He cut like an arrow through the rain and slammed boots-first into the back of the Yuuzhan Vong closest to Danni. The warrior splashed into the mud. Jacen reached out, grabbed another warrior by the wrists, planted one boot against his chest, and pulled hard enough to pop both arms out of their shoulder-joints.

He ducked low just in time to avoid another swipe. Danni tried to rise but he used the Force to shove her back down in the mud; it was the safest place to be. He came back up in front of the warrior with two useless arms dangling from his sides and snapped up a high kick that took him in the chin and sent him tumbling to the ground.

He glanced sideways at Tahiri. The woman thrust her

lightsaber between the plates of one warrior's armor, causing him to shout and drop his amphistaff. Tahiri caught it in mid-tumble and the creature naturally, effortlessly, coiled its lower half around her forearm while its upper body snapped straight just in time to block an attack from another warrior.

Now fighting with two arms, Tahiri kicked the second warrior back, then spun around just in time to catch another warrior's downward swing with her lightsaber. She cracked her amphistaff in a nonlethal strike at her enemy's head and dropped him unconscious in the mud.

This was not the weak, pliable, desperate Tahiri Jacen remembered.

She spun and saw him; their eyes met. He knew that they'd come looking for him only to get caught, first by rain and then by renegade warriors, and that they'd never expected him to come to their rescue.

Her eyes dropped to the binds that clasped both his wrists together.

His fell to the lightsaber in her hand, sizzling and popping under steady rainfall.

He felt it all in the Force: the indecision, the shock, the distrust and bitterness, the urge to let Jacen fight and die pitifully against these random warriors because it was all he deserved and they both knew it.

To all of that Jacen had only one response, and he sent it loud and clear through the Force: *Trust me.*

She lashed out. The vertical blur of lightsaber cut the tether that bound his wrists together. The moment she completed her swipe her hand snapped back up and the silver cylinder spun through the air and slapped into Jacen's rain-wet palm.

All of it- hesitation, choice, action- had taken less than a second.

Tahiri spun to face her second attacker and began parrying his amphistaff blows. Jacen raised Tahiri's lightsaber and spun around just in time to parry another warrior's thrust. A lifetime of lightsaber training came back to him instantly; he pushed the enemy's staff aside, lunged in, and slid his saber through the gap between the warrior's thigh armor and kneecap. The Yuuzhan Vong let out a scream and fell into the mud.

Another one came at him. Jacen sidestepped the thrust of an amphistaff and brought up a foot to kick the Yuuzhan Vong in the side. His boot-tip missed the soft spot between the warrior's armor and cracked hard against a Vonduun plate. Pain shot through Jacen's foot and he stumbled back through the mud.

The warrior jumped forward. Jacen caught the fanged mouth of his amphistaff with his lightsaber blade and tried to thrust the burning energy into the creature's vulnerable mouth. The amphistaff hissed and cried out in pain and Jacen felt a rush of satisfaction-

-and then the tail end of the weapon curled forward. The dagger-blade of the amphistaff's tail end caught Jacen in the forearm. He cried out, jumped back, grasped Tahiri's lightsaber hard even as the pain shot through his body. There was no poison in an amphistaff's tail, he remembered that, but it didn't take the pain away. He looked down to see fresh blood staining the arm of his rain-soaked jumpsuit.

Blood. Blood of a living, breathing man.

He savored the sight of it, just as he savored the pain, and the anger that came with it.

Feeling more alive than ever since his resurrection, he lunged forward again. The warrior's amphistaff was injured, dying, going limp in his hands. The warrior tossed it aside and drew a short-bladed couffe. To go after a man with a long-blade like that was suicide, but these were Yuuzhan Vong, so warped, so convinced of the holy righteousness of their glorious cause that they would sacrifice anyone and anything to achieve their ultimate goal, even themselves.

So like Darth Caedus, he realized in a flash.

Then the warrior was on him. The mud tried to suck his feet down but he called on the Force, pulled his boots free, and barely dodged the thrust. The Yuuzhan Vong swiped out with his couffe-arm, aiming for Jacen's neck. Jacen brought up his lightsaber; the blue blade scraped and crackled against the warriors' armored forearm.

The Yuuzhan Vong threw his entire bodyweight on Jacen, intent on slicing open his neck even if it cost him his life.

Jacen shifted his blade downward; it scraped across the

warrior's shoulder-pad, shifted, and cut clean through his neck.

The body instantly went limp against Jacen's. The couffe dropped in the mud and the heavy body threatened to pull Jacen down too, but he shifted his weight and let the headless corpse drop into the muck with its weapon.

He stared down at the body of the being he'd killed. He'd expected to feel something, elation maybe, or at least relief. Instead he felt a dull knowing pity for someone who'd lived to fiercely and died so pointlessly.

The rains had stopped. He wondered when that had happened.

"Jacen!" someone shouted.

He picked up his head and looked around. There was one enemy dead at his feet, three more unconscious or wounded in the mud. Tahiri seemed to have made an effort to incapacitate her enemies rather than kill them. She stood over one battered but breathing warrior, an amphistaff curled around either forearm, breathing hard, staring at something beyond him.

He followed her gaze. The last two warriors had Danni hoisted up between them. The woman's once-bright hair was plastered to her face by mud and rainwater. Her eyes were wide in fear as one warrior held the tip of his couffee against her neck. The second had one arm locked around her shoulder while the other held an amphistaff tight.

In broken Basic, the second warrior said, "Come closer, *Jeedai*, and woman dies."

Jacen lowered his weapon to his side but didn't shut it off. If these were normal beings he could have used the Force to meddle with their minds or pull the couffe-hand away. Failing that he could have summoned Force-lightning and fried them into submission, but even that wasn't an option, not here, not now.

Tahiri stepped up beside him. She said, "*Turr ch'kor ma'rokk Yun-Yammka rok'arr sen!*"

"*Yar'at chell rokk qahn lakk!*" the one with the couffe spat back.

"What did you tell them?" Jacen breathed.

"I told him Yun-Yammka doesn't want this."

"I take it he didn't agree."

"Pretty much."

Jacen tried to send calm to Danni through the Force. He didn't know what else he could do.

Then he remembered his Vongsense. He reached out and sensed from the warriors what he'd expected to find: fanatic conviction of the rightness of their cause, a desperate need to prove their devotion, and willingness to throw away any life, especially their own.

Yes, it was all too familiar. He wondered if anyone had found Darth Caedus as pathetic as he found these Yuuzhan Vong now.

Even as they stood there, threatening Tahiri's life, he found he didn't want to kill them. He shut off his lightsaber. It wouldn't do him any good.

Tahiri touched him in the Force with a question. She wanted to know what he was doing.

"Tell them their people will take them back," Jacen told her. "Tell them their Magister will forgive everything."

"Rel'yaim kout mekhes vorn'lath chokk," Tahiri said. *"Yoll kormet sekh tor'churokk zaim."*

He sensed some hesitation from the one with the amphistaff, but only steadfast devotion from the one with the couffee at Danni's deck.

The latter barked, *"Shalk haim tchor'mekh buhl sehn'ail chokk."*

"Nothing good?" Jacen muttered.

Tahiri shook her head. In a very low voice, she said, "Do you think we can take them?"

"No." He paused. "I'm going to try something else."

"Vongsense isn't the Force. We can't control their minds."

"No," Jacen said, "But we can nudge them a little bit. Can you make the one with the couffe confused?"

"Tchorr kell mol'yark qoll shell mok!" the one with the amphistaff jabbed the mouth-end of his weapon at Jacen and Tahiri.

She frowned; the scars on her forehead creased. "Maybe."

"Do it. Now."

He could feel Tahiri slip into the part of herself that was still Yuuzhan Vong, felt her try and reach out and at least blur the concentration of the one with the couffe. If she slowed his reflexed by half a second it could save Danni's life.

Their Vongsense was too weak to do more on the minds of sentients like these warriors, but non-sentient life-forms like the amphistaff were more pliable.

And after all, Jacen had always been good with animals.

He touched the primitive, simple mind of the amphistaff. He found it hungry for a taste of flesh. Amphistaff had to be training not to take a bite out of their owners, but sometimes instinct could overcome training.

He planted a little suggestion in its simple mind: *Look right.*

The amphistaff's head twitched toward Danni, toward the warrior with the couffe.

He sent one more suggestion. For a short second, that hard little blade looked like a tasty morsel.

The amphistaff snapped to one side. Before either warrior could react, its snake-like body brushed past the inside of Danni's chin. Its fangs clamped down on the couffe and jerked it out of the warrior's hand.

Tahiri grabbed hold of Danni in the Force and threw her down, but Jacen stayed in touch with his Vongsense. The amphistaff started writhing, jaws snapping, eager for a bite of either shocked warrior. The warrior with the staff threw it away and it shot off into the undergrowth.

Tahiri and Jacen both jumped forward. The warriors were defenseless but they raised their hands and claws anyway. They went down quickly; Tahiri cracked her amphistaff over one warrior's head while Jacen thrust his re-ignited light-saber-blade into the other's leg and threw him against a bora trunk hard enough to knock him out.

And then, finally, the forest was still.

Tahiri bent low and looped her shoulder under Danni's to help the Magster up. The older woman wiped the mud off her face with a jacket-sleeve and her green eyes found Jacen's.

"She swallowed and said, 'You saved me again.'"

His mind flashed back to the ice-caves of Helska 4, twenty years and another life ago.

"I just wanted to help," he said. In the end, it had been that simple.

But then he looked down at the prone forms of those Yuuzhan Vong, who in their worst had reminded him so much

of Darth Caedus, and he knew that no, it wasn't simple at all.

He felt another presence, quite clear in the Force. He turned around and saw Jaina, dark hair plastered to her face by rain, standing ten meters away with a shut-off lightsaber at one side. She'd reached them just too late, and now she stared at the scene in confusion and disbelief.

He looked down at the shut-off lightsaber in his hand; at the cut tether dangling limply from either metal cuff around each wrist.

He held the saber out to Tahiri, pommel-first. Without a word, she took it and hooked it to her belt.

"We need to talk." He looked around, let his gaze pass over the three women. "All of us."

As Tahiri helped steady Danni, Jacen looked across the forest at his sister, who stood where she was, motionless, watching him without a word.

Despite being in a valley, the village had been built to withstand rain. Irrigation canals funneled most of the storm-water toward the nearest river, and the daumuteks themselves were sturdy things that didn't let a drop through their armor-strong bodies.

Even after the rains cleared, heavy clouds hung overhead. The air remained cool and damp as the gray day slid into black night.

When night seemed close enough, the Wraiths wandered out into the gloom. Huhunna insisted she could start a fire, even with all the rain, and Jesmin didn't doubt her Wookiee friend. Soon enough, all five of them were hunched around the leaping flame. The air was thick with the crisp smell of burning kindling, churned-up and muddy soil, and wet grass. Jesmin tried to savor the natural richness of those smells; despite all her best efforts, she hadn't been able to experience the richness of the Force here at all.

She did her best to hide her disappointment, especially since Scut seemed to be growing ever-more enchanted with this place. As they are around the fire, they mostly listened to the Yuuzhan Vong rattle off the interesting bio-engineering information he'd gotten from his talks with Kodra Val and the

missing Qelah Kwaad, though Drikall was the only one who could halfway keep up with all his terminology.

They'd just about finished eating when Tahiri Veila showed up. Jesmin hadn't seen the woman since the previous day; she'd only heard that she and Jaina Solo both had gone off somewhere in the middle of the night.

"Welcome, welcome, Jedi Veila," Sharr said as he scooted aside, clearing a spot on his log.

"I didn't know you were back," Jesmin told her.

She felt something flutter off Tahiri in the Force; she couldn't tell what. The other woman sat down next to Sharr and leaned close to the fire. Her face looked clean and smooth, her hair damp, as though she'd just thoroughly washed.

"Do you want any food?" Scut asked. "We've cleaned out most of it, sorry, but we can--"

"I'm okay." Tahiri held up a hand. "I didn't come here to eat."

It was to be official, serious stuff then. Jesmin leaned in a little closer and watcher her over the fire.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Tahiri took a breath and said, "I take it you guys know everything about the messed-up transmitter."

Huhunna gave a low roar, and Sharr said, "Helped repair it ourselves. Or tried to, anyway."

"Then you know when one group comes, they'll all come."

"Do we have a plan for that?" Drikall asked, voice tense.

"We do now. It's not perfect but..." Tahiri took a breath. "It comes down to trust."

She said nothing more. After a curious pause, Sharr asked, "Trust in what?"

"Everyone," she said. "Everyone's going to have a role to play, including you guys."

Sharr spread his hands. "That's what we're here for."

"Thanks. This is going to involve a couple different teams. Sharr, we're going to be sending a group up into orbit, and I want you to take point on that. Drikall and Huhunna should go with you."

"Okay," he nodded simply. "What are we doing?"

"Holding the line," Tahiri said, but before explaining what

that meant, she shifted her attention across the fire to Scut and Jesmin. "I was more concerned about you two."

Jesmin tensed. "How so?"

"I'm going to be leading another team. It's going to be even more risky than what Sharr's doing, and probably even more important."

"Why us?" Scut asked.

When Tahiri didn't answer right away, Sharr slapped both hands on his thighs and said, "We can give you guys privacy if you want."

Jesmin was about to object but Tahiri nodded and said, "If you don't mind."

Sharr, Drikall, and Huhunna got up and wandered off into the gloom, leaving Jesmin, Scut, and Tahiri to hunch a little closer over the fire.

Tahiri looked at Scut first. "I'm going to be leading a team of Yuuzhan Vong commandos against a group of Sith. I want to know if you're up for it."

Scut's jaw hung open in silence for a moment; then an incredulous laugh rattled out of his throat. "You're serious."

She nodded gravely. "These Sith have never fought someone they can't feel in the Force. I don't want them to sense anyone on our team at all except me. We're going to give them a surprise."

"And you want *me* to come with you? Why?"

"Because I don't want just warriors on this mission, I want shapers and techs too. Kodra Val's already agreed to come on."

"But why *me*?"

"Because this world needs defending. Sharr and the others, they'll be up in orbit, doing their job, but my team is going to be in the thick of it. I don't want to pressure you to do this, Scut, but if you want to really help your people and help Sekot, this is your chance."

The Yuuzhan Vong looked down into the fire. "I'll have to think about that," he said, though somehow Jesmin knew he wouldn't say no.

She was still surprised when Tahiri looked to her and asked, "What about you, Jesmin?"

She blinked. "What *about* me? You just said you want to be

the only non-Yuuzhan Vong on the team.”

“I know, but I’d make an exception for another Force-user.”

“I’m not Jedi, though. Sure, I can throw stuff with my mind and wave a lightsaber around pretty good, but even then I got my butt handed to me once already.” She rapped her knuckled against the cast still on her leg. “Besides, I don’t even know what shape I’ll be in tomorrow. Drikall says I should be good enough to hobble around without crutches after a good sleep, but...”

“I understand. I just wanted to make an offer.”

Jesmin sighed. “Honestly, this place... I don’t know what I was expecting when I came here exactly, but I don’t think I got it.”

It hurt a little to admit it aloud. It hurt even more to see the look on Tahiri’s face; it was too close to pity.

“I’m okay though,” Jesmin shrugged. “I mean, I already pretty much knew I’d never make Jedi material. I guess I just... needed to be sure.”

It was a hard thing to make light of, especially when Tahiri could probably feel all that disappointment bleeding off of her in the Force.

Looking down at her hands, Jesmin said, “I just want to be useful for *something*, that’s all.”

“You can still be useful if you go up there with Sharr,” Tahiri said.

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.” She exhaled and asked, “What about Jaina Solo? I mean, if you need an extra Force-user to fight some Sith, I can’t think of anyone better.”

“Jaina’s going to be doing something... even more important.”

“Oh. With Ben Skywalker?”

There was a long pause. She looked up to see the other woman staring into firelight that danced in her green eyes.

“Maybe,” Tahiri said at last.

“Oh. So... you didn’t find him? I kind of assumed that’s what you were up to today.”

Tahiri shook her head. “That was... something else.”

Abruptly, the other woman seemed to cram her feelings up inside her. Jesmin couldn’t get anything off her in the Force.

Pushing off her seat, Tahiri said, "The operation starts tomorrow. You two should get a good night's sleep."

She didn't have to say it might be their last. Jesmin waved her goodbye and watched her golden head darken and disappear into the night.

She glanced beside her at Scut. His eyes were narrowed in thought as he watched the fire.

"You're going to go with her, aren't you?" she asked.

"I can't just walk away." He stopped, looked at her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"I know, don't worry. The Yuuzhan Vong, they're your people. You belong with them."

Scut's eyes went a little wide, like he was surprised by that simple realization. He nodded.

"And me..." She breathed out. She didn't know where she belonged, but maybe it didn't matter. Maybe the only thing that mattered in the end was the choices she made, the actions she took.

"Well," she said, "We'll find out tomorrow."

She rose from the log, looked down at Scut, and said, "I think I'll try to get some sleep."

He nodded but said nothing. As she left him at the fire, she had a feeling he'd be staring into the light for a long time yet.

When night fell over the village, Jacen did not want to sleep. A deep part of him was simply afraid. He did not want to lie down in darkness and close his eyes because a small part of him, against all evidence and logic, thought the past day of life might have been an especially strange dream conjured up by his consciousness as it floated in the timeless void of death. He was equally afraid that if he relaxed his awareness and drifted off into the oblivion of sleep, his soul might become unhooked from his body and drift back into death's nothing.

The others were afraid of night for other reasons. Though they hadn't put stun-cuffs back on his wrists, and though he'd professed time and again that he would not try to escape or flee, none of them trusted him. Even as he explained Vergere's idea of how to defend Zonama Sekot, he could see the distrust in everyone's faces.

It was different for each of them. Tahiri watched him behind a mask of lingering but well-earned resentment. Danni looked like she was watching a stranger. As for Harrar, the priest kept his emotions guarded and even through his Vongsense Jacen picked up nothing from him save a cool, curious skepticism.

And then there was his sister.

Her face, her eyes, her signature in the Force all said the same thing. Her brother had already hurt her once, and she would never trust him again, no matter what he said or did. He was surprised by how much that hurt, but if there was one thing Jacen knew how to deal with, it was pain.

Still, their suspicion lingered. They came to the decision that he would be watched all night long. With four of them, it was easy to work shifts. They put Jacen on a bed in a small room in the daumutek next to the Magister's. They gave him an oil lamp for illumination and a plate full of breads and oils to sate his stomach. It was bland food, but it felt extraordinary in his mouth. When they were done, he extinguished the lamp and lay face-up while Tahiri sat in the corner, watching without a word.

He closed his eyes, but didn't try to sleep. His fear of the night was almost childish, but there was nothing he could do the shirk it. As he lay in the dark, his mind began to wander. His body, surprisingly exhausted, felt like it was sinking into the soft bedspread.

Images came in the dark, painted on the blackness of his eyelids. He did not know if they were Force visions, memories, or fantasies of an unsettled mind.

He saw the Dark Man on his throne, dressed in horrific Yuuzhan Vong armor, with grown-up Allana standing proudly on one side while the blonde-haired man scowled angrily on the other.

He saw Allana, dressed in white, sitting on the same throne, surrounded by friends of all species.

Then Allana became Luke, aged but serene, still surrounded by friends.

Then Luke became him, Jacen as he had been, Darth Caedus surrounded by the same hooded acolytes who had bent before the Dark Man. Angry gold eyes were sunken within a pale, withered face. Allana, now a small child, sat at the foot of the

throne and looked up at her father in admiration. He felt revolted.

Then Caedus was gone too, and the acolytes with him. The chamber was empty except for a single man, dressed in black trousers and a battered bronze breastplate. He was stretched lazily across the throne. A leg was draped over a handrest while he rested his elbow on the other and propped up his chin in a cupped hand. This was the blonde man from his first vision, only instead of an angry scowl he now wore an expression of smug satisfaction.

Everything faded into darkness.

Darkness lingered a moment and forever, as it did in dreams. Then there was a spark of light.

He saw a man wielding the same green blades as the Dark Man but without the spiked armor. He was battling another Jedi in a broad sandy desert, while two suns set slowly in the west. He knew this, too, was the Dark Man, as he had once been. A'Sharad Hett.

He saw Hett again, this time old and wizened but no less fearsome, charging the blonde man with both sabers blazing. Strangely, he was without his Yuuzhan Vong armor here as well.

He saw a single figure, dressed in a vacuum-proof suit, drifting above a world now coming out of night. Sunlight spilled across its horizon, illuminating the surface of a brown, dry world that seemed somehow familiar.

He saw another figure, in another suit, drifting before a blazing sun.

Then he saw himself, wielding a red lightsaber he did not recognize, battling the Dark Man on a broad plain of black rock. Lava and brimstone broke through cracks in the earth and black smoke spiraled upward into an incongruously blue sky. Both of them fought like demons and Jacen willed himself to do better, to overcome this Dark Man and slay him, but he was trapped in his dreaming and could do nothing.

He jerked awake. He sat up in bed and found his face slick with sweat. He awkwardly wiped some off his brow with the sleeve of his tunic.

"Bad dream?" Jaina asked from the corner of the room.

He didn't realize she had switched places with Tahiri. In the darkness he could barely see her. He must have been asleep for some time after all.

"Something like that," he rasped.

"That's too bad," she said coolly.

"I think it was a vision," he admitted.

She didn't respond. In the night all he could make out was her dark shape against the dark wall.

He dropped back onto the bed and stared at the dark ceiling. It was a vision, he was sure. At least, some of it had been. The fight on the black-stone plain certainly had been, and it terrified him, because such a landscape implied that great catastrophe was about to befall Zonama Sekot.

He tried to make sense of the blonde man. He'd barely paid attention to him before, but he was hard to ignore now. The man seemed a possible friend or enemy of the Dark Man, just like Allana. Jacen tried to make sense of his vision of the man on the throne. Rather than a site of leadership or idolatry, the throne had looked derelict and useless. Was his vision telling him that this wry, angry, disheveled man would somehow make the Throne of Balance useless? Jacen didn't know if he liked that prospect or not.

"Jaina?" he asked the dark.

He waited a long time for her terse response. "What is it?"

"Jaina, in all this time, have you ever had... visions? Any presentiment of the future?"

"Maybe," she admitted. "Before I came here I had these dreams. I think they were about Zonama Sekot. I was seeing it from orbit and someone was trying to grasp it in his hands. I don't remember much beyond that."

"Do you think the Force was trying to tell you something?"

Another long wait, another gruff reply. "I'm a Sword, Jacen. My job is to fight and kill. And dispense justice, apparently. Vision quests were never my thing."

"You're lucky."

"She certainly is," someone else said.

Jacen jerked up in bed again and looked around. He heard Jaina moving around, and a second later her lamp flicked to life, casting harsh light and long shadows across the room.

Sitting in the corner opposite Jaina was man. He wore black robes in the style of the Jedi and long, tousled brown hair fell in front of his bent head, obscuring his face.

"Who are you?" Jaina asked as she got to her feet.

"Another ghost?" asked Jacen.

"It seems so." The man raised his head, revealing a long face, marked by a thin scar-line under the right eye. It was the face of a young man, younger than Jacen or Jaina, but its eyes were sunken with harrowing knowledge.

Jacen had seen this face before. He had seen in it holo-records projected by R2-D2. He'd seen it with his own eyes when he flowed-walked through the halls of the Jedi Temple during Order 66, desperate for a glimpse of what had turned his grandfather to the Sith.

"You're Anakin Skywalker," Jacen said.

The man nodded. "And you're my daughter's children."

"That boy we've been following around, the one Sekot speaks through," Jaina asked, "Was that you?"

Their grandfather shrugged his shoulders. "I was a boy when I came here. I guess Sekot likes to steal my face. It appeared to me as a little girl and a dead old man."

Jacen stared at this man, trying to wrap his mind around the progression from that round-faced, mischievous blond boy to this harrowed young man to, finally, the black-armored, half-human monster that had haunted an entire galaxy in life and his own dreams in death.

The grandfather he had feared and hated, only to end up walking the very same path.

Of all the marvels Zonama Sekot had wrought, this seemed the most impossible, beyond even his own resurrection.

"I wanted to talk to you so many times," Jacen said.

"I know," Anakin looked very sad. "I wish you could have. Things would have been very different."

"You spoke to me once," Jacen pressed. "A long time ago, but I heard it, and I knew it was your voice. I felt the whole galaxy tipping into darkness and you told me to stand firm."

"Yes." He looked even sadder. "Why didn't you?"

Jacen blinked. "I *did*. I stood firm against Onimi, I turned his poisons against him, I brought down the Supreme Overlord and

freed the entire Yuuzhan Vong. They're here on Zonama Sekot now, living peacefully. I ended the deadliest war in history. What more did you *want*?"

Anakin scowled. "And what happened *after* that?"

Jacen shrunk from his rebuke. Once, maybe even a day ago, he would have argued that everything he'd done had been for a just cause. Now, after his conversations with Vergere and Sekot, he was forced to admit that so much of the fierce ruthless desire that had birthed Darth Caedus had not been born from righteousness of necessity. Rather, it had come from his own aching ego and greedy desire to go beyond the boundaries laid by others, to be special and important and *different* from every other Jedi.

"Why do you look like that?" Jaina asked softly. "You were... much older when you died."

"I was scarred as Vader, and lived inside a black coffin. But I died as myself. I think that's how the Force chose to remember me."

"The same reason I still have both arms," Jacen surmised.

Anakin nodded. "You died as yourself too. It's the reason there's still hope for you."

Was it true? In that last moment, when Jaina had spun in for the killing thrust, he had dropped his weapon and called out with the Force, telling Tenel Ka and Allana to save themselves. In that moment he had drawn strength not from his anger or ruthless desire, but from whatever love he still had left in his heart.

"I wish... I could have talked to you before," Jacen said.

"Would it have made a difference?" Anakin asked.

"Of course it would have. I flow-walked back in time, just to see you when you turned. I sensed your anger and fear when you led those clone troopers into the Jedi Temple. I knew how determined you were to save the woman you loved. And I knew what it cost you."

"You knew all that," Anakin said, "And you *still* followed the path of the Sith?"

"I *had* to." The excuse was sounding weaker every time he used it. "And I didn't make the mistakes you did. On the surface, yes, but I was older. Stronger. I didn't make my choice

in anger or fear, I made a rational decision. The galaxy needed order to protect it from the Dark Man in my visions, and that's what I gave it. You made a selfish choice. Mine wasn't."

"You turned a local skirmish into a full-blown civil war," Jaina said bitterly.

"There was always going to be a war. I did my best to stop it."

Anakin shook his head. "After everything you've done, everything you've seen, you haven't really learned."

"I've learned a lot," Jacen said defensively. "Far more than any Jedi."

"You thought you use the darkness for your own ends," Anakin said with bitter knowledge. "But the Dark Side always uses you."

Jacen tried to find some riposte, but he couldn't. It was as Vergere and Sekot had already told him. In his vanity and self-importance, he had wreaked havoc and death, and lost his own soul. And worst of all, he had failed to stop the Dark Man in his vision.

It was such awful knowledge that his mind still kicked in denial like a stubborn child, and just like a child he had no power to change the irrevocable facts in front of him.

"Have you ever thought," said Anakin, "That in trying to prevent this future, you created it instead?"

"I didn't create the Dark Man."

"No," his grandfather allowed, "A'Sharad created himself."

Jacen stiffened. "You knew the Dark Man too?"

"We had a lot of differences, but a lot in common. We were both two boys from Tatooine who could never get over our losses, so we raged against the universe instead."

Jacen looked down at his bed, trying to wrap his mind around all the tethers of fate that had bound three generations of Jedi together.

"When A'Sharad embraced his rage," Anakin said, "He thought he was making himself stronger. He wasn't. He was just reducing himself to the angry child who could never get past his father's death."

"What can I do?" his voice cracked as he stared at the ghost of his grandfather. "How am I supposed to fix this?"

Anakin looked at him for a long time before he said, "Do what you should have done from the start."

It was the worst piece of advice. Jacen had made mistakes, awful ones, he had to accept that. Yet even when he wracked his mind, he could not think of anything he could have done differently. He couldn't have just ignored the vision of the Throne of Balance. He couldn't have gone to Uncle Luke for help without risking Allana's life and dragging Luke into the awful fate he'd felt for himself. If he'd cast aside Lumiya's offer, he'd have abrogated his moral responsibility to seek peace for the galaxy.

"What?" he pleaded. "Tell me what I'm supposed to do. Please, *tell me what I'm supposed to do!*"

Anakin looked to Jaina. "He really is a fool, isn't he?"

"He always had been."

"Tell me, *please!*"

Anakin sighed and bowed his head. "Once I stood in the lair of a Sith lord. I had my lightsaber pointed at his neck. I was ready to kill him. But he offered to teach me new powers, so I could have what I'd always wanted. I thought the Force existed to serve me, not the other way around. So I lowered my lightsaber and lost my soul."

"I know. So did I. But what would *you* have done differently? I know about your situation. The Jedi Council insulted you, distrusted you. They tried to deny responsibility for your training. They were fools. You could never have gone to them for help."

"I didn't have to trust *them*." Anakin held Jacen's eyes. "All I needed was to trust my brother."

"Brother?" Jacen scowled. "You didn't have a brother."

"Obi-Wan," Jaina said softly, sadly, like she'd been touched with some deep hidden knowledge.

"I had his open hand in front of me," Anakin said. "And instead I chose a Sith lord over him." He laughed a dry, bitter laugh. "I deserve everything I got after that."

Jacen looked away from his grandfather. His gaze met Jaina's and held. Neither flinched, not this time. Even in the dim lamp-light he could see the sadness, the regret, the resentment, even the compassion in her dark eyes.

"You're never as alone as you think you are," said Anakin Skywalker. "You're never as special either. I learned both those things too late. And so did you."

Jaina only looked away when the tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them clean with the sleeve of her jacket. Her body shook with restrained sobs.

"Stand firm" their grandfather said. "Together."

Jacen looked over, only to find an empty corner of the room.

"Jaina," he said, "Jaina I—"

"I have to go," she spun for the door.

"Jaina, wait I—"

She opened the door, slipped though, and slammed it shut. Jacen sat in silence for a long time, staring at the shadows on the wall. She didn't come back to see him, but he hadn't been expecting her to.

He sat for a long time, legs against his chest and chin on his knees. He closed his eyes and saw dim red through his eyelids. He waited for more visions to appear but nothing came. Everything was still, everything was silent, and he felt very alone. It was almost like being dead again.

"I have good news," a voice said.

Jacen opened his eyes and saw the boy with dirty-blond hair sitting right where Anakin Skywalker's ghost had been.

"You," Jacen said simply.

"Was that helpful?" His grandfather's boyish voice was so innocent.

"Is there anyone *else* you want to bring back from the dead? Anyone *else* to tell me all the ways I'm messed up?"

"I think you already know them all," the boy was suddenly severe. "You've just been too scared to admit them."

"All right, fine." Jacen tried to throw his hands back, only for them to catch on their shackles. "I'm a liar, a killer, and an all-around failure. Total sleemo supreme. Are you happy now?"

"Are you?"

"No. I'm not happy at all."

"Then neither am I."

Silence lingered between them. Finally, Jacen asked, "What now? What do you have to tell me?"

"Two things, actually."

“Good news?”

“Maybe,” the boy shrugged.

“*What* news?” Jacen snarled.

He was sick of being toyed with. Darth Caedus had prided himself on being master of all, but Jacen Solo suddenly felt like everyone had been toyed with him his whole life by the Jedi, the Yuuzhan Vong, Lumiya, Vergere, Zonama Sekot, even this A'Sharad Hett who had haunted his dreams. His lifelong yearning for greatness seemed to have made him the galaxy's sucker.

The boy held up a finger. “One, it looks like they've got the communications system online. They should be ready to fire the beacon within a few hours.”

“Great,” Jacen said. “That means every ship in the Unknown Regions is going to zero in on our location.”

“Pretty much,” the boy nodded and held up a second finger. “Do you want to know what else?”

“Tell me.”

“I think I've found your cousin.”

Ben. Jacen had hardly thought of Ben. He'd been trying not to. He already had to look at Tahiri and Jaina all the time and have all the pain he'd given them reflected back. He'd probably hurt Ben most of anyone, which was no small feat.

But there was still some pain he had to embrace.

Jacen drew a breath and asked, “Is he on your surface somewhere?”

“One of my islands, in the western ocean,” Sekot nodded. “They're my newest land-masses, and I've had a hard time keeping track of everything there.”

“But can you guide me? Can you show me exactly where he is?”

“Not yet, but I'm narrowing it down.” The boy leaned forward intently. “You need to go rescue him, Jacen. You and Jaina, together.”

The image of Anakin Skywalker echoed what the dead man's own ghost has just said. Working with Jaina seemed to be another pain he'd have to embrace.

There was no use complaining, so he said, “Okay. Let us know when you're ready and we'll go after him.”

"There is a Sith with him," Sekot said. "And, I think, more coming for him."

"You mean the Dark Man?"

The boy nodded gravely. That took Jacen by surprise. All this time he'd been assuming that when the Sith Lord descended to Zonama Sekot, he would be coming for Jacen himself. Apparently that meant he hadn't yet cured himself of egocentricity.

"Why Ben?" Jacen pressed. "What reason, specifically?"

The boy gave a mock sigh. "The Force only tells me so much, Jacen."

"I know. Sometimes I wish it had a neck so I could strangle it."

The boy laughed. It sounded surprisingly authentic. Jacen's thoughts kept moving. He had been focused on protecting Allana all this time, since before she was even conceived. He'd barely thought about the blond man in his vision, and received no warning about him through the Force. Was it possible this man, too, was yet to be born? Could he be some descendant of Ben, destined to topple the Sith once and for all?

As Sekot had said, the Force only told so much. But it was the best idea Jacen had to go on right now.

He stretched out his legs and tipped them over the edge of the bed. Stretching his bound hands in front of him for balance, he dropped his feet on the ground and stood up.

The boy cocked an eyebrow. "Going somewhere? It's the middle of the night."

"I'm not going to get any sleep. Besides, I have to get ready. All of us do."

"Very true," the boy said. "You'll all have to stand firm. Together."

Chapter 23

The day she'd graduated from the Imperial Naval Academy, Fy'lyor had donned her crisp new olive-gray uniform, stood in line with a bunch of pale-skinned human cadets, and recited the pledge of allegiance to the Empire that all new officers had drilled into them by heart.

It was a pledge as old as the Empire itself, though much of the wording had been worked and re-worked over the years. In its original version, every new officer promises to uphold the will of the Emperor. After the Emperor's death, those lines had been hastily changed to mention the 'leaders of the Galactic Empire.' As that Empire had started fracturing, those lines were changed again. Instead of swearing allegiance to specific people, new officers promised to defend values such as law, order, and the undeniable unity of the Galactic Empire, which at that point had become, to everyone outside, a Remnant.

When Fy'lyor had made the pledge, she had recited new lines purportedly written by Grand Admiral Pellaeon himself. She still swore to defend law and order, but she also swore to 'protect and serve all citizens of the Empire.' For whatever it was worth, Jagged Fel and Vitor Reige hadn't touched Pellaeon's words during their terms in power.

Perhaps it was because she hadn't sworn loyalty to a person that Fy'lyor had found it easy to turn traitor.

Natasi Daala had sworn a very different oath than Fy'lyor had. Jagged Fel hadn't sworn one at all. There were things she admired in Jagged Fel, and very different things she admired in

Daala, and when she had been forced to choose between them, eventually betraying the former for the latter, she hadn't agonized over personal loyalties, but rather her loyalty to the Empire itself.

That was why she kept asking herself whether using the bioweapon would really protect and serve all citizens of the Empire.

She never did it out loud. Despite the limited repore she'd built with some of *Chimaera's* crew, she was still a stranger on Daala's ship. During her moments of downtime she would go to her quarters and pace and roll that question over and over in her mind.

She knew she'd been naïve. Daala had gotten her to join by convincing her that exterminating all Yuuzhan Vong was in the best interest of the Empire. At the time, she'd expected such a genocide to happen in a flaming space battle, and a rain of turbolaser fire on the forests of Zonama Sekot. Slipping a bio-weapon into the planet and instantly condemning all life there felt very different. It was less honorable, no ways about it.

But honor, too, could be a trap. Honoring his alliances and joining with Jacen Solo's fleet at Fondor had led Gilad Pellaeon to his death. If the old man had just slipped Solo some poison from far away, the galaxy would probably be a much better place all around.

Daala was not a woman who stressed honor. She was about getting the job done, quick and dirty. In theory, they could exterminate the entire Yuuzhan Vong race and not lose a single Imperial life. By that logic, Fy'lyor would be betraying her people by *not* assisting in Daala's hasty genocide.

But that was also too simple. Bio-weapons were notoriously unpredictable. If a single Yuuzhan Vong ship escaped Zonama Sekot, it would carry the disease to another world, where it could mutate and infect local life-forms. It could, in theory, keep mutating until it had destroyed all life in the galaxy.

And yet, other options seems scarce. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet was still somewhere in space, searching for them. Zonama Sekot had proven itself willing and able to destroy dozens of ships in a matter of seconds. Realistically, the bio-weapon was the only chance they had left for victory.

The options rattled through Fy'lyor's mind over and over again and she never found purchase. She felt like she could spin around forever in indecision, but she knew she didn't have that long.

She was lying on her bunk, thinking when she was supposed to be napping, when the call came.

She rolled off her bed and flipped open the channel. "Captain Fy'lyor reporting."

"Come to the bridge at once, Captain," Daala said.

All Fy'lyor had to do was straighten the uniform she hadn't taken off. Then she marched down the corridor, rode up the turbolift, and walked onto the bridge of her star destroyer.

Daala, of course, was already there. She was hunched over the communication console and wore a predatory glare. Fy'lyor felt a chill run down her body.

This, as they said, was *it*.

"Captain Fy'lyor, reporting," she snapped a salute.

Daala gave her a nod and she relaxed her pose. The old woman said, "We've picked up a signal, Captain. A long-range beacon has been repeating the same message for the past seven minutes."

"What does it say?"

"It's encrypted, so we can't be sure. However, we were quickly able to pinpoint the source of the transmission."

"Do you think it's Zonama Sekot?"

"There's only one way to find out." Daala checked the console. "The source is less than two hours away at light-speed. I want to be combat-ready the moment we drop out of hyperspace."

"Yes, Admiral." Fy'lyor nodded. "Have you decided on a plan of attack yet?"

Daala understood she was asking about the bio-weapon. The weapon was still a tightly-guarded secret shared only with Fy'lyor and select operatives loyal to Daala. As far as Fy'lyor knew, none of them were on the bridge now.

"The preparations are almost complete," she said curtly.

"I see. Will the, ah, prime attack be launching from *Chimaera*?"

"We will be doing it based on the plan you have laid out."

Daala said it gently, like she was reminding Fy'lyor of the great trust she'd shown her. If it was meant to make her feel better it was doing the dead opposite.

"Very well. Follow me to my ready-room once we launch for hyperspace," Daala said. "We will review your... battle plan one more time.

"When will that be?"

As if on cue, the navigation lieutenant reported, "Admiral, Captain, we are ready to jump to the coordinates you've provided."

"Excellent," Daala said. "What of the other ships?"

"*Repulse* and *Resolve* have recalled their fighter escorts and are standing by. *Lanvarok*, *Schimitar*, and *Halberd* are also standing by."

"Excellent." Daala glanced at Fy'lyor. "Captain, please give the order."

"Very well." Fy'lyor cleared her throat and raised her voice. "Communications, open a channel to all ships."

"Channel open. You're go, Captain."

She hesitated, just for a moment, but she knew she was in too deep to escape now. Whether her choices had been good or bad, she had no choice but to live with them. Or, quite possibly, die with them instead.

Either way, she was about to find out.

"All ships, launch."

Starlines stretched out and filled the forward viewport with light. Fy'lyor had seen it so many times she'd gotten used to it, but right now it took her breath away.

Daala, unsurprisingly, was not impressed by the sight. She clapped a cold hand on Fy'lyor's shoulder and said, "Follow me, Captain. You have a lot of prep work to do, so I'll try to make this brief."

Reluctantly, Fy'lyor pulled away from the beautiful spiral of infinity and followed Daala to her lair.

After returning from their research excursion aboard *Honor Regained*, Vilath Dal, Qelah Kwaad, and Dician moved quickly. They had brought with them a new plate of Vondun

A armor to replace the one they intended to remove, along with necessary surgical equipment.

After Darth Krayt put himself into a healing trance, they laid out the Dark Lord in the center of the lab and began operation. Everyone else, Sith or Yuuzhan Vong, was locked out of the room save the three scientists. At their disposal, they had the best tools from two galaxies, from Yuuzhan Vong molecular probes to Sith holocrons. At times Dician consulted the latter, just as Vilath Dal sometimes referred to the qahsa he'd brought over from *Honor Regained*.

Qelah Kwaad didn't refer to any guides. Whatever was rattling around in her mind, it was all the old shaper needed.

Even as they performed the stressful operation, Vilath Dal was impressed by his peers. Dician was ever-alert and orderly. Qelah Kwaad's madness seemed to have abated, replaced by a knife-sharp focus on the task at hand. He wondered if boredom hadn't been the cause for her mental decay over the years.

Boredom had seemed a danger to him at times, but that was in the past. Like Qelah Kwaad, it seemed he'd just needed a good war to provide an invigorating challenge.

When the procedure was finished they moved Krayt, still in mediation, to his stasis container. Then they began the methodical, routine act of cleaning up their surgical equipment.

For that, Dician was more helpful than Qelah Kwaad. The old shaper seemed distracted once the challenge of Krayt's operation was gone. While Vilath Dal and Dician wiped the operation table clean and gathered the remains of Krayt's corrupted armor for disposal, the old shaper picked up his qahsa and began scanning through its contents.

As the old shaper kept muttering to herself in barely-audible Yuuzhan Vong, Dician leaned close to Vilath Dal and asked, "How long do you expect Lord Krayt to stay in his healing trance for?"

"I am no Sith. I cannot answer that."

"Only Lord Krayt can, then." Dician frowned. "I am glad we acted swiftly, but I'm worried he may still be recovering when we need him."

"We've done all we can," Vilath Dal said. "Whatever else... Well, I suppose it's in the hands of your Force now, isn't it?"

"My people believe in taking things from the Force, not waiting for it to hand them favors," Dician said stiffly.

"Very good." Vilath Dal gave a needle-tooth smile. "Just the right attitude for a shaper."

"Shaper!" Qelah Kwaad echoed in Basic.

Vilath Dal turned to her. "Yes, what is it?"

"Shaper, yes, shaper..." Qelah Kwaad went back to mumbling in her native tongue. "Shaper, one-who-was-shaped, one who may be... hmmm... *un*-shaped..."

"Un-shaped?" Vilath Dal stepped across the room. "What do you mean, un-shaped?"

"Him!" Qelah Kwaad stabbed a finger to the door of Krayt's mediation chamber. "He was shaped once. And re-shaped. By you. By me. But, yes... I think... He can be un-shaped."

"You mean we can remove the armor?" He'd gone over Krayt's biology a dozen times and seen no way to remove it without killing him. Again he wondered if his old master had stumbled upon something brilliant, or if she was simply mad.

"Possibly, possibly," Qelah Kwaad tapped the qahsa. "I feel... we have half the knowledge."

"You mean we have half, and they have half?" he gestured to Dician. "Are you saying he needs the Force to get rid of the armor?"

"What's going on?" Dician frowned. "What's she saying?"

"She says there may be a way to remove the armor, using our skills and the Force combined."

"How? Is she saying *how*?"

"I cannot understand how," Qelah Kwaad said in Basic. "I understand only... little. Less than little of how your Force works. But I have some ideas. Yes, a few ideas... I must think on them. I must do research. Yes, more research, and you must help me."

"I'd be honored," Dician said soberly. Vilath Dal couldn't tell if she was buying into Qelah Kwaad's ramblings or if she was putting on act. Come to think of it, he didn't know if *he* was doing either.

Before he could say anything, he heard the distinct sound of knuckles rapping on the laboratory's outer door. He had no idea why someone didn't try to use the communications system

installed throughout the ship; perhaps they were afraid of rudely interrupting Darth Krayt's surgery.

The knocking continued as Dician walked over to the door and opened it. The circular portal irised open to reveal the weathered red-and-black face of Darth Nether. Though the old Dornean's eyes were a uniform milky white, suggesting blindness, he moved like one with perfect sight. Vilath Dal was skeptical, but he admitted Force magic could have been at work there.

"Greetings, Lord Nether." Dician gave a slight bow. "Our operation on Lord Krayt is a success. He's recovering in a healing trance."

"Excellent," Nether said, but he seemed to have other things on his mind. "We have intercepted a transmission, broadcast on a wide frequency."

"From whom?" asked Dician.

"We do not know. It is encrypted. However, we were able to locate the source."

"Is it Zonama Sekot?" Vilath Dal asked.

"Most likely." Nether nodded. "Lord Wyyrlok has told us to set course in hyperspace. *Honor Regained* has agreed to jump with us. We will be at Zonama Sekot in under an hour and should be ready for battle."

"What about Lord Krayt?" asked Dician. "I do not know when he will exit his healing trance."

"Lord Wyyrlok insisted we jump immediately. There's not telling when the other fleets will get there." He glanced at the closed portal to Krayt's chamber. "The reckoning our Lord predicted is at hand. He will not fail us now."

Dician nodded with conviction. And, as he stared at that chamber where the dragon lay sleeping, Vilath Dal found that he shared it too.

Wynssa Fel had been aboard *Vindicator* for less than two days, but she was already getting used to it. The atmosphere aboard the Imperial ship was markedly different than that of *Starless*. The crew (mostly human, but not all) moved with discipline and efficiency. Every corridor and chamber was well-cleaned. Despite the frantic conditions and awkward

shuffling of ships and supplies to accommodate the newcomers, Wynssa never heard a crew-member complain or raise objections to Captain Vernedet. It was almost as if people in the Empire knew their place.

Yes, she much preferred this to how the Alliance did things.

She admired that efficiency now as she walked down the center aisle of *Vindicator's* bridge with Captain Vernedet. The old captain had conducted himself admirably thus far, maintaining polite and formal communication with Wynssa, Jagged and Captain Pavric from *Corusca Gem* so that all parties could make arrangements for mutual benefit. He allowed no insolence from his crew and got none either. He was the kind of middle-man that had surely kept the Empire alive for almost seventy years despite a long chain of corrupt, abusive, or outright insane leaders.

They were at the tactical station, where the holoprojection showed the positions of the surviving capital ships in Trinity Fleet, including the converted *Phoenix*. *Sunbeam* was rendered in an orange mark, and smaller green dots marked the supply ships that were currently hovering around the dead cruiser like scavenger birds as they picked away useful materials from its carcass. Small dots also marked the fighter patrols that flew around the fleet at all times. Right now there were two flights in space: four E-wings from *Corusca Gem* circling the gas giant's lower orbit, and four of Wynssa's own Clawcraft making a wide arc just outside the planet's gravity well.

"How much longer until your patrol is due in?" Vernedet asked.

"Approximately twenty standard minutes," she told him.

Vernedet nodded. "All right. I'll get a flight of Interceptors prepped to take their place."

"Thank you, Captain. Have your squadrons been moved to *Corusca Gem*?"

"They have. We were lucky they had docking bays suited for TIE fighters."

"I appreciate your volunteering to move your squadrons. It means a great deal to keep all my pilots in one place."

"I'm sure it makes them easier to coordinate," Vernedet said. "And I'm sure it's hard enough for your pilots to get used to

one new barn. Having to spread them out over two ships would just confuse—”

“Captain!” a woman called from the communications station. “We’re picking up a signal, coming across on multiple frequencies.”

Wynssa tensed. This could very well be the coded beacon from Zonama Sekot that Jag was waiting on.

“What does it say?” Vernedet stalked over to the comm station and Wynssa followed.

“We can’t tell, sir. It’s encrypted, but it seems to be a wide-range broadcast.”

“Zonama Sekot,” Wynssa said.

“Very likely.” Determination set on Vernedet’s craggy face. “Lieutenant, get me a line with Commander Fel. Now.”

“Copy. Stand by.” The woman flipped a few switches. “*Starless*, this is *Vindicator*. Requesting direct link to Commander Fel.”

They waited a moment, then Wynssa heard her brother’s voice scratch over the speaking.

“This is Fel,” he said. “You’re getting the signal?”

“We are,” Vernedet said. “Can you decrypt it?”

“We already have. It’s a message from Master Solo.”

“Do we have a location?” Wynssa asked.

If either Jagged or Verndet minded her intrusion, they gave no indicator. Jag said, “Yes. We’re sending it to all ships.”

“How far away are they?” asked Vernedet.

“A little over an hour. Expect a combat situation immediately after we revert to realspace.”

“That’s not much time to prepare,” Vernedet scowled.

“There’s nothing we can do. We’ll launch as soon as we recall our fighter patrols.”

“Copy,” Wynssa said, and hurried back to the tactical station to issue a recall to her fighters.

Behind her, she heard Vernedet ask, “Should we put all staff on combat standby?”

“Not just standby,” her brother said. “I want everyone on red alert.”

Wynssa popped off her recall order and watched on the tactical screen as her Clawcraft began wheeling their way back

to *Vindicator*. The E-wing flight was also on its way back to the barn.

Vernedet settled on her side. "Commodore, direct orders from Commander Fel. He wants all crew on red alert and all fighters ready to launch."

"I heard." Wynssa said. "Before we jump, I want to borrow your long-range transceiver. I need to relay these coordinates."

"Help?" Vernedet raised a gray eyebrow.

Wynssa nodded. She had no idea if Shawnyr would be able to muster any additional support. In fact she doubted it; the isolationists on Csilla had probably claimed vindication after *Celestial's* destruction and would use it as reason to block any more foreign ventures, no matter how hard Shawnyr or her father protested.

"I can promise nothing," she said, "But I think we may need it."

"That's a distinct possibility. My transceiver is yours, Commodore. If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

As he stepped away, Wynssa said, "Thank you, Captain. As my people say, fight brave and fly true."

He looked over his shoulder. "A Chiss adage?"

"A Fel one, Captain."

"Hmm. Good thing we've got two of you today."

She watched his back as he walked off. She didn't dare tell him that Soontir and Sval Fel had already lost four children in battle. Given their family's history, it seemed almost inevitable that at least one more child would be lost in the coming inferno.

Then again, there was nothing typical about the battle ahead, or the situation Wynssa found herself in now, which she had never been trained for, never expected, never imagined facing.

If they had come that far, there might be another miracle or two in store.

Part V: The Dragon

"It's not about waging war, Anakin. It's about finding peace, and your place in the galaxy."

"Pretty words mean nothing when the fighting starts."

"A Jedi at peace is a better warrior by far."

Jacen and Anakin Solo, 25 years ABY

"From what I have seen, peace does not seem to be the natural state of the universe."

Zonama Sekot, 29 years ABY

"Stand firm."

Anakin Skywalker to his grandson, 30 years ABY

A LONG TIME AGO....

Just when she thinks she's in the clear, a low branch swings out of nowhere and knocks Jaina back. She falls butt-first into the packed soil and bites back a curse.

"Hey, what happened?" Jacen calls from up ahead.

"Nothing," Jaina grumbles. "Just a stumble. I'll catch up."

She doesn't want Jacen to know that branch caught her unaware, though he'll probably figure it out when he sees her with a dirt-brown backside and twigs in her hair. With a muted sigh, she plants her palms on the ground and pushes herself up.

Then the legs of an orange jumpsuit drop in front of her. Her youngest brother bends low and extends a hand. There's a wry Solo smile on his face but also concern in Anakin's ice-blue eyes.

"You okay, sis?" he asks.

"Just fine." Jaina takes his hand and he pulls her to her feet.

"Hey!" Jacen calls. "You guys coming?"

"Sure," says Anakin, "Right behind you."

She can tell Anakin's a little annoyed. Jacen was the one who suggested they take this weird trip out into the jungles of Yavin 4, a good half-day's trek from the Great Temple. Anakin hadn't wanted to do it. He'd wanted to stay back at the Temple with Tahiri and work on one of the mechanical contraptions he was building from old Rebel Alliance machinery abandoned a quarter-century ago. Jaina was, in fact, the one who twisted his arm and got him outside, but he still seems to blame Jacen for the fact that he's trekking out in the jungle and getting himself sticky and smelly with sweat.

He and Jacen never get along nowadays, which is alternatively amusing and frustrating to their big sister. But this is the last time all three of them are going to be on Yavin for a while, so she insisted he come along on whatever adventure Jacen's thought up.

"Come on, guys!" Jacen insists from up ahead. "I've found it!"

"Found what?" Anakin insists as he presses ahead through the brush. Jaina follows right behind him.

"A secret place," Jacen says proudly.

Anakin pushes away one last branch and nearly pitches forward into empty air. Jaina sees him lose balance and reaches out with the Force to grab him, but Jacen just shoots out a hand and stops him by the chest.

Anakin rocks back onto his heels. Jaina steps up beside Jacen and feels her jaw drop. The land in front of them suddenly drops. Bare rock and jutting tree branches plunge some twenty meters into a thick canopy of trees. The forest continues to stretch westward toward a sun that has just begun its afternoon descent. In the far, far distance, beneath the half-faded red-orange curve of the planet Yavin, she can see the pyramids of the Massassi Temples jutting out of the endless greenery.

Even Anakin lets out an impressed whistle.

"I can't believe we've never seen this place before," Jaina marvels. She's been training on Yavin 4 for over three years now, and she's had plenty of adventures, but none of them have brought her here.

And there have been a lot of adventures. Their brush with the Dark Side at the Shadow Academy, their encounters with Anja Gallandro and Boba Fett, their foiling resurgent the Black Sun's schemes, their battle against the Diversity Alliance and its lethal plague... She sometimes wonders how her adult life can ever be as exciting as what she's already been through.

A part of her is scared to find out.

"This is a great spot, Jace," Anakin admits. "Where did you find it?"

Jacen scratches his curly brown hair and blushes a little. "Actually, Tenel Ka showed me."

"Ah." Jaina cocks an eyebrow. "Aha. So tell me, did you and Tenel Ka happen to wander out here, sit on the cliff's edge and watch the beautiful sunset while edging ever-closer together?"

"It wasn't like that," he blushes deeper.

"Well that's disappointing," Jaina crosses her arms over her chest.

It is disappointing. It's obvious they both like each other, and have for two years, but neither of them has actually done anything. Tenel Ka has her stoic warrior woman act and Jacen's been on philosopher-Jedi kick lately. Neither of them seem willing to admit the obvious. It's like they're confused teenagers or something.

"I just wanted to show you guys this place," he says. "Together, you know, since we won't all be on Yavin 4 for a while."

"We'll come back soon," Jaina says confidently. "After all, Tenel Ka and Tahiri are going to be lonely without you guys."

"Don't forget Zekk," Jacen pipes.

"Let's not talk about Zekk," Jaina sighs. She likes Zekk, he's a great friend and always will be, but somehow she doesn't feel that same spark of excitement she did just a year ago.

"Okay, forget Zekk." Jacen crosses his arms over his chest. "Is Aunt Mara going to let you pilot the Jade Saber to Rhommamool?"

Jaina nods. She's happy to get a chance to try out the ship, but she can't say she's happy for the reason. Aunt Mara has been ill sick lately, and nobody can figure out the cause, so she needs all the piloting help she can get.

"Well, have fun sorting out border disputes with Mom and Mara," Jacen says. "We'll have fun on Coruscant, right Anakin?"

Their younger brother hums neutrally. He's never been talkative and acts even less so when Jacen is badgering him.

"Yeah, enjoy meeting with Borsk Fey'lya's Advisory Council," Jaina says sarcastically. The firebrand preacher they're set to meet on Rhommamool, Non Amor or something, sounds ominous, but she'd still rather deal with him than the corrupt Bothan and his cronies. She already has to listen to Mom complain all the time and that's bad enough.

"I don't mind Fey'lya." Jacen says. "Well, not that much. I want the time to talk to Uncle Luke."

"Is this about the Jedi Council?" Anakin asks.

Jacen nods.

"You're not going to try and talk him out of it, are you?" Anakin asks. Jaina holds back a sigh. When they're not giving each other the silent treatment they're fighting. She hopes they both get out of this teenage boy ego-preening stage fast.

"Hey, I just have some concerns," Jacen says. "I don't think it's right for the Jedi to make themselves all formal like that."

"The order's getting huge," Anakin insists. "We need a central authority so we can serve the New Republic better."

"Is that what you want to be? A Republic foot-soldier? Being a Jedi's about so much more than that. It's about-

Something bursts out of the forest. A big flock of birds races past them and fans out into the sky. Jaina and Anakin throw themselves to the right, Jacen to the left. Anakin nearly slips but Jaina uses the Force to pull him back onto level ground. And Jacen-

Jacen seems to fall in slow motion. He loses balance, pitches forward, and for one horrible second his panicked eyes lock on his sister's. Then he's gone.

Jaina shouts his name and peers over the edge. Anakin holds her back by one arm and she leans as far as she can, praying she can spot him somewhere in the treetops below.

"I don't see him," she says frantically. She reaches out with the Force through the special twin bond that has bound her and Jacen together since birth. She would sense his death, she's absolutely certain. Right now she feels nothing from him, not even a lack.

"I don't think he's dead," Anakin says. "But I can't sense him either."

"Let's get down there," Jaina says.

"How?" Anakin looks around. The cliff's steep drop fans out dozens of meters on either side.

"We go the direct way," Jaina says.

She turns around and lowers her legs over the edge of the cliff. Anakin doesn't protest or hesitate. He does the same. Together, they climb down the cliff one step at a time.

It's long trip down. Every move is carefully calculated. Thankfully, the cliff-face is made of layers of jagged stone that provide easy foot- and hand-holds, and when no thin ledge is available, grab hold of dangling roots to help lower themselves down. All the while the afternoon sun burns their backs and their jumpsuits grow dark with sweat-stains. Dust gets in their faces and they periodically have to spit it out over their shoulders.

Neither of them complain, hesitate, or even slow down. Step by step, layer by layer, they make their way into the jungle.

When they put their feet on solid ground, they fan out to explore the shadow-dark forest floor. Jaina takes out her lightsaber just in case, as does Anakin. The dark bottom layers of Yavin 4's jungles can hold all sorts of unpleasant creatures, from man-eating plants to leftover Sith-bred monsters. If Jacen is hurt or unconscious, he'll be especially vulnerable.

Jaina reaches out through her twin bond, desperate to find Jacen. As she fumbles for his presence she puts all of herself into that bond: her love, her concern, her anxiety, most of all her fear. If Jacen gets hurt or even killed, and if she's in any way responsible, she knows she'll never forgive herself. Losing her twin brother would be like losing half her life. Jaina without Jacen would be an empty husk.

And as she lets it all flow out honestly, she feels something touch her back. Jacen calls to her, drawing her toward a certain point in the forest.

"I've got him!" she calls out with relief.

"Is he okay?" Anakin asks as he makes his way toward her, voice tense.

Jaina doesn't know. She still can't tell. All she knows is that Jacen is calling her, and she has to come.

As Jacen's presence gets stronger, she sees specks of light up ahead, peeking through the maze of shadows and dark tree-trunks that make up the forest floor. As she gets closer the light becomes brighter, and she realizes she is approaching a clearing in the forest where the light shines freely down to ground level.

She steps out and sees Jacen lying in the middle of a patch of grass. There are birds on the ground, surrounding him, resting

at his elbows and knees. One of them sits on his chest and seems to be pointing its beaked face at Jacen's own.

As Jaina and Anakin press into the clearing, the birds take flight. Wings flutter and shadows flicker as Jaina and Anakin round on their brother. He hasn't moved since their arrival and Jaina's breathe catches in her chest. If Jacen is hurt in any way, she'll never forgive herself.

But instead he's lying there with the sun in his smiling face. That face is scratched and dirty, and parts of his jumpsuit are torn or stuck with tree-branches, but he looks otherwise uninjured.

"Dummy!" Jaina shouts and punches him in the shoulder.

"Hey!" Jacen squawks, sitting upright. "What was that for?"

"I was worried!" Jaina wipes away the stupid tears coming to her eyes.

"Why? I used the Force to break my fall."

"I didn't know that! I thought you were dead or something and here you are, lounging in the sun with your animal friends."

"Sorry. I didn't mean for you to worry," Jacen says. "I need to stop doing stupid things."

"No kidding," Anakin mutters, and Jaina laughs through stifled tears.

"Nice spot though," Jacen says.

"Yeah," Jaina admits. "You do know how to pick 'em."

Anakin sits down next to Jacen and kicks his legs out across the grass. Jaina sits down on his other side, and all three siblings lay back in the grass and stare at the bright sky overhead.

"This is good, isn't it?" Jacen asks and closes his eyes.

She closes her eyes too and feels sunlight burn through her eyelids. She has no idea what awaits her on Rhommamool, or when she'll be together with her brothers on Yavin 4 again, but right now she doesn't care. Right now she has what she needs.

Right now is enough.

Peace.

Chapter 24

Sometimes when he dreamed, he seemed to move beyond time, even beyond life and death.

Some dreams were as vivid as waking life; others were barely dreams at all, but instead a formless flow of sensations, images, thoughts, even smell and noises. An instant could take forever to pass and forever could pass in an instant. Sometimes he seemed to rise with the bright light of a new sun, walk among stars, and sleep in cosmic dust. Others he felt trapped in a very narrow place and time, but the place and time varied in so many ways. Sometimes he was reliving old memories in explicit detail. Other times he was stepping into possible future that shifted from moment to moment like hot sand beneath his feet.

Now his dreams took him back through memories.

They were the worst kind.

He dreamed that he was on sitting in the cool shade of a rocky outcropping. The suns were setting behind his back and the stone draped ever-lengthening shadows across the sand. In the distance, pillars of smoke rose above the gentle curves of the Dune Sea's horizon-line.

Behind him sat a Jedi in a tattered brown tunic. The peak of his conical head was bald but a grey-white beard lined his tired, sad face.

In this dream, he knew sadness too. He relived it in vivid detail nearly a century old, just as he relived the stark beauty of a Tatooine sunset. His father had just died. His father *has* just

died, gunned down by the bounty hunter Aurra Sing. In his dreaming, past and present slip together and everything becomes one:

"What happened today was a tragedy," Ki-Adi Mundi says.

He shifts uncomfortably and says nothing.

"Your father died bravely," the Jedi continues. "You should mourn him, but you should also be proud of him."

"What happens now?" he asks. He says it softly, and the mouthpiece of his Tusken headdress mutes his voice just as the wraps and goggles mask his face from the harsh desert and prying eyes of outsiders.

But the desert is silent, and Ki-Adi Mundi hears him perfectly. "That is for you to decide. Do you want to stay on Tatooine?"

"My people are gone," he says bitterly. His father and his entire clan have been slaughtered by Hutt mercenaries motivated by nothing other than greed.

"Then, if you wish, you may come with me to Coruscant. It is very different from what you know, and it will be startling. But if you wish to follow on your father's path and become a Jedi, I am willing to teach you."

He shivers despite the day's lingering heat. He has no idea what he wants to do or where he wants to go. All he ever wanted was to be with his father, but now that possibility is gone. He is alone and helpless like a tiny child again, though he is well into his teenager years and an adult by Tusken standards. He hates this feeling of helplessness, of being dependent on others. It is made all the worse by the knowledge that his father's killer escaped, and that Sharad Hett's death in unavenged. A part of him hopes that, in becoming a strong, powerful Jedi Knight, he will never be at the mercy of anything ever again.

And yet, being a Jedi did not save his father.

"If I come with you," he asks, "Can you teach me to become strong?"

"Of course," says Ki-Adi Mundi.

"I want to protect people. Protect myself. I don't want what happened here to happen again, ever."

"Neither do I," the Jedi says. "Together, I hope we can work to that end."

"Together," he says. He is still skeptical, but the power of the Jedi is the only power available to him now.

"Okay," he says, "I want to become a Jedi. Like my father before me."

"I'm glad." A soft, sad smile shows on Ki-Adi Mundi's face. The Jedi is thinking of his father, of course.

So is he. And he will never stop.

And then, with the easy flow of dreams, it was another place, another time.

He was bowed low, knees pressed against the hard cool tile of the chamber in the Jedi Temple. Gold afternoon sunlight filtered through broad transparisteel windows that show the endless speeder traffic moved through the endless forest of skyscrapers that was Galactic City. This planet was the polar opposite of his birth world, and he'd never gotten used to it.

When he was raised by the Tusken, he was always taught to equate power with size and raw animal strength. The leaders of clans settled disputes by physical combat. Children were told to behave or the dreaded Krayt Dragon would come and gobble them up, and until he saw one with his own eyes he'd believed the Krayt was just a myth from bed-time stories.

Therefore, he still had a hard time accepting that the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy was the wrinkly green gnome hobbling in front of him.

When it came to power, power he could believe in, he found himself drawn much more to the young Jedi bowing at his side.

Over the past few months the young man had become something like his apprentice, though it has never been made official. He was left without a padawan after Bhat Jul's death on Aargonar, while the young man was left without his master after Kenobi's disappearance. Neither of them were generally good at making friends, but they'd bonded nonetheless.

After all they were both Tatooine boys.

"Reckless, you were," Master Yoda grumbles. His walking stick goes tap-tap-tap as he circles the two bowing Jedi. "Put many lives at risk, you did."

"With all due respect, Master," Anakin protests, "We saved lives on this mission. The Separatists had encircled the civilian fleet and-"

"Their plan, that was! Holding the convoy as hostages, they were. Coming to negotiate, Master Plo Koon was. Knew this, you did, yet you still attacked."

"It was a trap, Master," he speaks up, though he still keeps his head bowed low so all he can see are the tiles.

"Know this, you did, Master Hett?" Yoda asks. Tap-tap-tap. "Sense it through the Force, did you?"

"We sensed dark intentions, Master," Anakin says. "We both did. We discussed and agreed that when Master Plo Koon's team arrived, he would be in great danger."

"So charge out of hiding you did. An ambush, you decided, was better than a peaceful solution." He can't see it, but knows Master Yoda is shaking his wrinkly green head in disapproval.

"The ambush was successful," he insists. He understands Yoda's point, but the old gnome's moralizing is ignoring the main issue. "We saved all of the ships the Separatists had captured."

Master Yoda's walking-stick cracks like a whip against hard tile. "Against orders, this was! Four full squadrons of clones, we placed in your command. After the battle, two squads remained."

"I'm sorry for the loss of life, Master," Anakin says. "But the clones knew the risk. So did we. Like I said, every civilian ship was saved and the Separatists were routed."

"Enraged, they are."

"They should be," he says. The ambush and defeat of that Confederate fleet was a major blow to their operations in the Atrivis Sector. No matter how hard Master Yoda admonishes, he won't stop being proud of what he and Anakin did.

"Reinforcements, they will send. A harder battle ahead, there is. Escalate the war, you have."

"Master Yoda," he says, "The war is already beyond escalated. It is burning through half the galaxy. If we don't take the war to the enemy, smash them, and bring back peace, what good are we?"

"Peace? Brought no peace, you have."

He can't take it any more. He picks his head up and stares right into Master Yoda's dragon-eyes. That gaze scares him, reminds him of childhood monsters, but he presses on.

"Master, we are Generals in the Grand Army of the Republic. You and Chancellor Palpatine sent us out to fight a war and that's exactly what we did. I see nothing to be ashamed of."

Yoda stares at him for a long time and he cannot tell what the old Jedi is thinking. Raised among Tusks, he never learned to read human facial expressions, and while he has made improvements since leaving Tatooine, Master Yoda's alien face is even more inscrutable.

But when he looks into the little green alien's eyes (vertical and reptilian, they almost remind him of a Krayt's) he fears that Master Yoda can see into the very core of his soul. He wishes he could still hide behind the wrapped mask of a Tusken, but he gave that up after Aargonar. After Anakin confessed that his mother was murdered by a tribe of Tusks, and that he slaughtered them in revenge.

It is a secret he has kept out of respect for Anakin. Anakin knows this, and respects him in turn. If Yoda or the other Masters knew, it would surely end the young man's brilliant career, and the Jedi cannot afford to lose such a talented warrior while the Republic fights for survival.

More than that, in the fear and helplessness of a Tatooine orphan, still raging against a universe that so cruelly stole his family, he sees a reflection of himself.

Finally, Yoda says, "Those who wish to learn, I can teach. Those who do not, I cannot. Rise, both of you."

He stands up straight, as does Anakin. Master Yoda looks up on them and says, "Re-assigned, both of you will be. Skywalker I will send to Praesitlyn with Master Halcyon. Master Hett, I shall keep on Coruscant for now. Never again shall you work together. Encourage each other's recklessness, you do."

He feels like screaming rage, but he holds his feelings in check. "I understand, Master Yoda."

"Thank you, Master Yoda," Anakin says politely, though he doesn't sound thankful at all.

After that they walk out of the chamber. They pause by a window and watch the traffic drift through Coruscant's skyline.

"At least you get to do something," he mutters.

Anakin nods but says nothing. He watches the traffic and it seems like he has something else on his mind. He is closed off in the Force, as he often is nowadays.

Being shut off from his friend makes him feel even more alone. Being disciplined by Master Yoda makes him feel more helpless. As always, his destiny is someone else's to command.

"I wish I were back on Tatooine," he sighs.

Anakin stares hard at the smoldering sun and says, "I don't, Master. I never want to see that place again."

"I'm not anyone's master any more, Anakin. Please, just call me A'Sharad."

Time flowed.

He stared at deserts and skyscrapers and then he was staring at a blank white wall. Hot dry air became cold. He shivered but didn't move from the chair to which he was bound. His entire body felt utterly empty; it had been days since he'd last eaten. He could have summoned his Jedi strength, used it to break free, but there was no point. He had no place else to go. Everything he'd ever known was destroyed.

He'd known this would happen when he surrendered to the Bavinyari rebels, and was mildly surprised they hadn't started torturing him yet. After all, he'd been their enemy for months, right up until the end of the Clone Wars.

Then friend had become enemy and enemy had become his last, desperate chance to escape the Jedi purge.

When the door to his cell cracks open he is surprised by what he sees: no brute torturer, no bitter soldier in battered armor. He sees a woman, maybe ten years younger than him and over a head shorter. She wears straight black hair pulled off her round white face. She wears the crisp brown uniform of the Bavinyari Defence Fleet (defunct, now that Palpatube's new Empire has subdued the planet) and he's struck by an improbable attraction to her severe beauty.

"My name is Jereveth Syne," she says coolly.

He knows that name. She is now leader of the rebel band, daughter of the man killed desperately defending Bavinyar from the Empire. He never imagined she looked like this.

It takes him a moment to find the strength to speak. When he does, his throat scrapes. "A'Sharad Hett."

"I know that." She takes two steps forward. "You've been a bane to us for the better part of a year, Jedi. What do you think you can offer us now?"

"Help. Against the Empire."

She leans a little closer. Her face seems comfortable in its scowl, but in his mind's eye he can see it relax into a smile. Then he wonders if he sees with more than that. It might be delirium or dehydration, or it could be the Force, telling him that his fate will be irrevocably connected to this harsh and beautiful woman.

It tells him she will take him places he'd never imagined, places the old Jedi forbade him to go. He finds himself wondering if he is still a Jedi at all.

"What is it?" She must have seen something on his face. "Are you trying one of your magic tricks? Stealing from my mind?"

"No," he says honestly.

Her expression doesn't relax. She keeps staring at him as though she were the one who could read minds.

"What do you think will happen now, Jedi?" Syne asks.

He didn't know when he'd surrendered to her people, but revelation comes to him now out of nothing.

"Together," he rasps.

"Together? Do you think we'll fight together against the Empire, after all you've done to us?"

That and so much more. When he speaks he feels like the Force is speaking through him: "Together... To the end."

Time flowed.

His eyes were squeezed shut against the brilliant, blinding sun-bleached desert-white of pain. Pain was all he knew, all he was. Pain embraced him, permeated him, and filled his entire being. There was no past, no future, not even dreaming. Only pain.

And then suddenly it was gone.

Its echoes reverberated through his body for an eternity, and when the echoes grew grim enough he opened his eyes and saw a squat, bird-like creature staring at him with mirror-black eyes and an ambiguous half-smile on its wide mouth.

"Among our masters," says Vergere, "It is not considered shameful for a warrior in your position to pray for death. It is occasionally granted to those who have displayed great courage."

But he can't die, not like this, not torn apart by the monstrous creatures who have captured him. Not when he is being taunted, teased, and examined by this strange Jedi who seems even more alien than Master Yoda.

"Some say our masters worship pain and death, but that is not true. They merely chose to worship life in a manner that does not deny the great pains and tribulations attached to it. They do not hide from their emotions. They do not deny the ugliness of the universe. I've found there is much different between the Yuuzhan Vong and the Jedi, and while some of those differences should be abhorred, others are to be admired."

"I know there is darkness in you. Are you a Sith?" he croaks.

He has asked her this before and received different answers. Once she told him she was a Jedi who had left with the Yuuzhan Vong from a living planet called Zonama Sekot, so she might learn their secrets. Another time she claimed she had been an apprentice to Darth Sidious himself, and had been forced to flee after she tried to kill him. By now, he does not believe anything she says. He plays her games only because they distract from the pain.

"I am Vergere." She tilts her head and blinks. "What are you? Not a Jedi, I imagine. The Jedi are dead."

"Do you mourn them?" he asks.

He doesn't anymore. Since Order 66, he's come to realize how cowardly the Jedi were, obsessed with their own righteousness at the cost of better beings' lives. His last flicker of sympathy for them ended Obi-Wan Kenobi severed his arm outside the Lars Homestead so he could safeguard the son of Anakin Skywalker, all the while wrapping himself up in the pompous, hypocritical nobility that embodied everything he'd come to hate about the Jedi Order.

Vergere doesn't answer at first. Maybe she is considering. Finally, she says, "I do not miss the hide-bound ways of the

Order. I do not miss the pretensions of the Jedi Temple. But there were many fine beings whose passings I now mourn."

He has found he doesn't mourn anyone, not even his first master Ki-Adi-Mundi. A part of him even wishes Anakin and Palpatine had begun his extermination sooner. His experiences after the Clone Wars taught him that extreme actions are sometimes needed to preserve that which was important, actions old dead Jedi would have called dark and turned away from even when it could have saved billions.

"You're more... merciful than I," he allows.

Vergere cocks her head. "Tell me, what do you think the Force wants for the Yuuzhan Vong?"

"I don't know," he spits. "I don't care. I just want to be free from these monsters."

"And what will you do then? Rebuild the Jedi?"

"The Jedi are better off dead. They deserved to die. I just want to be free." He's already pleaded with her to release him from this painful embrace, but the strange creature showed no mercy. He will not debase himself by begging again.

"Freedom can be a lonely, frightening thing." She sounds a little disappointed.

"I'm used to being alone. And scared. And powerless." He grits his teeth in anger. "But when I am free I will never be any of those things again."

The crest atop her head flares. "Truly? And how do you plan to accomplish those ends?"

He has spent so long in the Embrace, torn between torment and anger, that he has only one answer left. "By destroying anything that gets in my way."

Yes, that is disappointment on her face. She turns away and starts for the exit.

"Wait!" he cries hoarsely. "You still haven't explained anything! Where did you come from? What do you want?"

She pauses at the threshold and look back at him. "Something you can never provide."

She steps through, and the portal winks shut behind her.

Then the white comes back.

Agony, as vivid in dreaming as it was in life. His memory was a map of agonies, failures, fears. Most of all it was marked

by helplessness. Again and again, he was defined by others. His father. Aurra Sing. Ki-Adi-Mundi. Yoda. Syne. Kenobi. Vergere. The Jedi, the Yuuzhan Vong. His own broken body. Any sane being would rage at so many forces arrayed against it.

The Skywalkers who haunted both memory and dream.

Sometimes he could do more than rage.

Sometimes he could take revenge.

Time flowed. A good memory came and he savored it. He stood in the hold of a ship. A green lightsaber blazed in either hand: one his father's, one his own.

He trained with them as a padawan and now he fights with them as a Sith. He could, in theory, change the focus crystals to bright red, as traditional for Sith, but he has kept them as they are after all he's been through – Clone Wars, Yuuzhan Vong captivity, decades sleeping in an ancient Rakatan regeneration chamber- because he wants to remember. And, maybe, because he has been waiting for this day.

Aurra Sing sneers at him as he leans against the wall, clutching the scorch mark on her arm. In her other hand blazes the blue lightsaber of some Jedi long dead. He has chased her a long way, across the stars and over decades and finally into the belly of this ragged freighter. He is amazed how little she has changed since the day she killed his father the better part of a century ago. Whatever species she is must be blessed with impressive longevity.

Unlike her, he has changed a great deal.

"Who are you?" she sneers and tries to rise up on shaking legs. "What are you? You're not Yuuzhan Vong."

"I certainly am not."

"You're not a Jedi either," Sing says. "A hunter, then? Are you a hunter like me?"

"After a fashion," he says, and stretches out one hand. He grabs Sing by the throat and lifts her, gagging and choking, into the air.

She has not lived this long by being unprepared. With a flick of his wrist, she sends her lightsaber spinning toward him. With his other hand he flicks it away, and Force-throws her back against the bulkhead.

The woman curses and pulls her saber back toward her. It is still ignited, and it scrapes and smokes across his armor before it drops back into her hand.

"Vongspawn!" she spits. "Monster!"

"A monster worse than you," he agrees, and strikes without raising a hand. His invisible blow takes her by surprise, and she screams as her left calf bone shatters. She tumbles to the ground and he gives her another blow, knocking her head hard against the wall.

When he steps closer she raises her lightsaber to fend him off. A third invisible strike snaps her arm in two. Her lightsaber rolls across the floor. He steps down on it with his heel and the ancient weapon crunches and sparks.

He stares down at her, savoring her dying agony.

"Who are you?" Aurra Sing cries through her pain. "What do you want with me?"

He turns off one lightsaber, then the other. He reaches up and, slowly, removes his Yuuzhan Vong mask to reveal a withered, tattoo-lined face.

He stares at her. She stares back, uncomprehending.

"My name was A'Sharad Hett," he says, and waits for her to understand.

She doesn't. She keeps staring, like she'd expecting more. When she gets nothing she sneers at him and says, "Get it over with, whoever you are."

He screams and slams a foot down. Her ribcage breaks under his heel. He kicks again, cracking her skull. Her eyes seem to float in her sockets as he ignites both lightsabers and swings them down.

When he finally walks out of the chamber, there is little remaining of what was once a living being.

He has dreamed of this meeting for decades. He has seen this last encounter in many visions and they always ended with Aurra Sing dead beneath him, but he's never seen what her last words are.

He's never known if she would understand his vengeance.

After he knew she never would, he felt indescribably hollow. He looked within himself to see what was left once he'd had his revenge. He needed to know if the anger was still there, the

burning desire to make the universe ordered and whole through the power of the Sith.

This was a most important juncture. For decades he'd told himself that he was driven by a desire greater than vengeance, a need that went beyond that of a broken orphan boy.

He found the drive remained. He'd had his revenge, but his deeper drive held fast. He felt purged and cleansed, more resolved than ever to bring order the only way he knew how.

He walked down the hallway, out of the chamber, and back to his shuttle. As the freighter disappeared in a fireball behind him, he set course for the Maw. He had an appointment to keep with Anakin's son.

An appointment that would cause more pain, and drive him back to the arms of the Yuuzhan Vong.

Suddenly the past was gone and the pain was gone with it. He stood on a broad plain of black rock. Lava and brimstone broke through cracks and spouted upward toward a clear blue sky. He held a lightsaber in either hand and faced two figures charging at him with burning blades of their own.

One was a small, dark-haired woman. The other was a dark-haired man whose eyes blazed in cold fury.

He knew them both. They had stalked his dreams for a long time, but he had thought them consigned to his possible pasts.

In this dreaming- possible past, possible future- he does not hesitate. He never hesitates, not any more. He raises his sabers, catches their blows, and pushes them back. The woman is knocked two steps back but the man angles his saber in for a thrust. He twists his body so the blade scrapes and smokes across the surface of his Vonduun Crab armor. Then he reaches out with the Force to grab this man- this man who is surely dead- by the neck and twists as hard as he can.

And then there was pain, horrible searing pain crackling through his body. Even in his agony he could sense the source of his pain, see it glowering at him beyond the arcs of Force lightning that swarmed through his body.

Darth Wyyrlok stands, hands extended, firing destructive enrgy from his fingertips. His mouth is open in a broad triumphant grin as he kills his master. Wyyrlok the loyal,

Wyyrlok the first, Wyyrlok who has guarded him in his sleep for many decades, is now Wyyrlok the traitor.

And then the pain was gone. His body ached with emptiness.

Laughter, laughter he cannot not understand.

Twin sabers still blazed in his hand, one red, the other green. He wore not Yuuzhan Vong bio-formed armor, but metal and synth-fabric stretched across his skin, the kind any normal being would wear, the kind he hasn't felt caress his body since before Vergere and the Embrace of Pain.

He had never dreamed of *that* before.

He turns to see a different man, the one who has stalked his dreams for decades. The man has curled, unruly blond hair, a scowling face, eyes that blazed in anger and determination. He wears black trousers and a battered bronze breastplate and holds a lightsaber in one hand. His lean, muscular arms are laced by tattoos and scars.

There is something in his confident sneer that echoes his ancestor, Anakin Skywalker.

He charges. He swings both blades down at the sneering man again and again, but Skywalker is nimble and he is old. Skywalker dodges one blow, deflects another, and manages to pulse out a Force shove that nearly throws him back-

And they were floating in space, both of them. Amidst a turning sea of endless stars one bright sun burned hungrily in front of them.

There was nothing else.

Just the two of them.

Walking in the sky.

Then he stopped dreaming.

Dark Krayt opened his eyes.

Waking up from his dreams usually hurt, but pain was something he had lived with all his life and did not mind. Strange, the pain seemed less than what he had expected. He reached out to touch the plate of Vonduun Crab armor on his abdomen, the one Dician and the shapers claimed they were going to replace.

Putting his life in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong disgusted him beyond words, and beckoned memories of his long and awful imprisonment. But as he told Vergere almost seventy

years ago, nothing was going to stop him from accomplishing his design. No Skywalker, no Solo, and certainly no Yuuzhan Vong.

He reached out and grabbed the edges of his sleeping coffin. He pulled himself to a seating position and from there rose to standing. His legs wavered for a moment, then were steady.

He rose on one leg, then the other, and stepped out of the chamber.

Those in the laboratory did not whirl in surprise at his emergence. On the contrary, Dician and Darth Wyyrlok bowed low to greet him, while the two Yuuzhan Vong shapers did the same. All of his Sith could sense, instinctively, when their leader had awoken.

"Greetings, my Lord," Wyyrlok said. "I am glad to see the operation was successful."

For the first time, he looked down at the armor plating the shapers had replaced. It was darker and smoother than the rest of his armor, and the pain that was once there, constantly clawing into the hole in his chest left by Abeloth, was gone. He wished he could be rid of the Vonduun Crab armor all together- and his recent dream gave some hope- but in the end it, too, is just one more thing to suffer through on the way to his ultimate goal.

Thankfully, he knew how to use his suffering. It was the one thing he thanked the Yuuzhan Vong for.

"Report," he said. The difficult thing about his dreams was that he lost all sense of time. Some seemed to last an hour and took years. Others seemed to last forever and took mere minutes. From the look of the laboratory and the people in it, he had not been gone long.

"My Lord," Wyyrlok said, "We have arrived at Zonama Sekot."

He stretched out with the Force, and yes, he felt it, the great planetary consciousness. It felt dim, half-hidden, like Sekot was retreating from his touch.

Despite its show of aggression against the True Victory fleet, it seemed Sekot had not learned to fully embrace its anger.

Very well. Darth Krayt was ready to teach it.

"Are the other fleets here?" he asked.

“None yet, My Lord. The fleet had settled into a mid-range orbit.”

“Good.” He looked at the two shapers. “Return to your vessels and prepare for battle. The other fleets will arrive soon.”

The tall male shaper bowed, but the hunched old crone shook her head, making the tentacles of her wilted headdress sway comically.

“My Lord Krayt, Lord Yun-Yammka, please. I have more research to do.”

He glanced at Dician. “What does she mean?”

“She believes she may have found a way to remove your armor, Lord Krayt,” Dician said.

He looked back at the old shaper. She did not look like much, but without her he would not be alive right now.

“Very well,” he rumbled. “You may remain, but only if Dician supervises your research.”

“Excellent, excellent,” the woman nodded, though Dician looked wary of the prospect.

Krayt turned his attention back to Wyyrlok. “Take me to the bridge. I want to see Sekot.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Wyyrlok bowed.

Krayt stepped past the scientist and the shapers and followed Wyyrlok through the curving, dimly-glowing halls of *Revenge*. He could feel the hungry life pulsing somewhere inside the ancient Rakatan vessel, a hunger that matched his own. When Wyyrlok's agents had found the ship in the Unknown Regions, Krayt had felt an immediate affinity.

“Have we succeeded in contacting Vestara Khai?” he asked as he followed his servant. Wyyrlok was his first discipline and the most devoted. Many times he had reached out in his dreaming state to touch Wyyrlok's mind, relaying visions and sensations, scraps of information and, most importantly, instructions.

He would not be doing that for a while, not until he riddled out the meaning behind his recent dream.

Wyyrlok seemed to sense nothing of his master's reticence. “We have yet to find Lady Khai, my Lord.”

“And the mediation sphere she used?”

"No. It is possible that it was destroyed when Zonama Sekot jumped to hyperspace."

"In which case Lady Khai would be dead," Krayt said. "And with her, the Skywalker boy she kidnapped."

"That would be a logical conclusion," Wyyrllok admitted.

"No," Krayt shook his head. "A Skywalker still hunts my dreams. His line has not been extinguished."

Of course, Darth Caedus *had* been destroyed, yet Krayt had just dreamed of *him*, too. After so many years and so many dreams, there was still so much he did not understand, and it infuriated him.

When they stepped onto the bridge, every robed Sith Lord and acolyte bowed deeply. Krayt barely noticed any of them. His eyes were fixed on the viewport ahead, and the beautiful blue-and-green planet glowing brilliantly before him.

He stepped up to the viewport, reached out, and touched his palm against the transparisteel like he was caressing the curve of the planet's surface. He stretched out with the Force and felt its mind again, strong but reticent, and so very alien.

And he felt, too, something he'd known for the better part of a century. It was a thread that ran through all the myriad faces of his life, from Jedi Knight to Jedi Master all the way to Dark Lord of the Sith, a thread that even ran through his dreams and taunted the future he strove to build.

Skywalker.

The boy was still alive. He was down there, somewhere. In destroying him and ending his line forever, Krayt would shatter the last of the bonds that had restrained him.

"Mine," he snarled, and reached out another hand to cup the planet's shape from both side.

"Mine," he repeated, and felt the hunger grown inside him. The hunger to destroy, to dominate, to abase the whole galaxy, bring it to his knees, and force it to worship his invincible strength.

"Mine!"

Chapter 25

The storms were gone and the raining had stopped, but the sky had yet to clear. A film of gray hung over the valley, featureless except for the one point where the white orb of the sun shone faintly through. The air was still humid and the earth still damp. Everything smelled like mud and grass.

It was weather for a gloomy, lazy day, but the village was a hive of activity. Yuuzhan Vong, Ferroans, human, Chiss, and other beings hurried every which way. Many were carrying supplies up to the landing field, which was now filled to maximum capacity with both mechanical and Sekotan vessels.

They said the True Honor fleet had just arrived. It had taken a position orbiting the planet but had not yet attacked, if it planned to attack at all. Venku Skirata had never understood the Yuuzhan Vong, and despite what some people claimed, Zonama Sekot had not made him understand them any better. He hoped that, like *Mando* warriors, they had a certain loyalty to their home planet that would not allow them to fire on it.

He stood on the edge of the landing field, leaning against the border fence and watching the preparations. Mereel, Jendri, and Bess were with him too. Since the battle at the hyperdrive engines, they'd had nothing to do except sit around and feel useless, which was exactly how a *Mando* hasn't supposed to feel. At the same time, his companions didn't jump at the opportunity to help prepare.

When Venku saw Jaina Solo trekking uphill to the landing field, he broke off from the others and approached her. If anyone

was going to give him answers, it was her. Everybody else took one look at his armor and kept their distance.

He raised his arm to hail her. "Solo! Can you spare a minute?"

Jaina stepped off the gravel path to let a pair of Ferroans drag a cart through. She planted her hands on her hips and asked, "What is it? We don't have a lot of time."

"You fired the beacon and called the fleet here, didn't you?"

Jaina nodded. "Looks like the Vong got here first. They haven't attacked us yet, and Sekot hasn't attacked either."

"So you're sending ships up? Do you think that's safe?"

She snorted. "I never thought a *Mando* would lecture me on safety."

He conceded the point. "What can you do, though? I heard Sekotan ships don't even have weapons."

"We're hoping to... fight without fighting."

She didn't seem very confident in the prospect, and neither was Venku. "Why isn't Sekot attacking?"

"Family," Jaina said, and one word explained everything. "We're hoping the Vong feel the same. But when Jag or Daala show up... Well, we've got to be ready."

"So you're going up there." He glanced at the shuttles. Jaina Solo was many things, but she'd never lacked for bravery.

"I'm not going up there," she shook her head. "I'm going to get Ben."

"Your cousin? Did you find him?"

"More or less." She didn't sound confident in that either. If anything, she seemed very distant, like neither the coming battle nor, even, her cousin.

"Your brother," Venku said. Once more, simple words explained everything.

Jaina drew in a breath, let it out, then nodded.

"I hadn't heard."

"We're trying to keep it quiet. *Very* quiet."

"I'll keep my yap shut, then."

"Thank you."

"But he's... alive? *Really* alive?"

"Something like that, yeah. We're going after Ben. Together." She seemed less than excited about the prospect.

"Is he still a total *shabuir*?"

"I don't know. He's..." She shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder if I ever knew Jacen at all."

"He was your brother. Your Jedi twin brother."

"I know." Jaina rubbed her eyes tiredly.

Still, he couldn't help but envy her. Here on this strange planet, this place that supposedly resurrected the dead, he hadn't seen, heard, or felt anything from Gotab since his passing. The Jedi talked of the Force like it was a guide telling them where to go, but to Venku it felt like a big, yawning silence. He wasn't sure if that was the fault of the Force or himself for keeping it at arm's length all his life. Right now he wished for something, anything, to tell him what to do.

"Listen," she said, "I have... a few things left to get ready. Danni's giving a briefing down in the valley. You should go."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"That's up to you. But things might get hairy up there. I'm betting Jag and Danni could use people fighting fit."

"We're *Mandos*. We usually get paid for that."

Jaina frowned. "Listen, I can't tell you what to do. But you people have a pretty simple choice as I see it. You can either sit on your *shebs* here and wait to get bombed, or you can jump in a spaceship and help save lives."

It was, he had to admit, a stark choice.

"Okay," he said. "I'll think on it."

Jaina nodded, then went back on the path and walked uphill. Venku fought a sight and watcher her crest the top and disappear onto the landing field. He shifted his gaze and saw Mereel, Jendri, and Bess still leaning over the fence, watching the preparations. They looked restless, even old Mereel, but he didn't know if they'd feel okay with putting their lives on the line for this place.

If he told them to fight, they'd fight. He knew that. It had been like that since he was a teenager. He hadn't asked for their respect and obedience, but they gave it to him because of who his parents were and what they had been through.

In that, he was a little like Boba Fett. Which wasn't the most pleasant realization.

"Hey, Venku!" he heard Jaina call behind him. He turned around to see her trotting down the hill's water-slick grass with ease.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something came up. I need your help." She kept walking downhill, right past him. He did his best to follow her down the slope toward the village.

"What is it?" he asked as he caught up. "Should I get the others?"

"No, I just need you for this." She didn't look back. He followed her bobbing brown head down the slope, but instead of heading directly into the village she ducked into a copse of young, short bora trees rising out of a downhill incline.

The mulch-covered earth inside the copse was muddy, and Venku had to grip the tree-trunks to keep from sliding down to the bottom of the slope. At some point he lost sight of Jaina Solo, and when he got to the bottom he looked around and found he was alone.

It seemed impossible. Jaina Solo had been there one moment, then disappeared the next. He looked around the copse but saw no footprints except his own. Through the tree-trunks he could see beings still milling about the village and carrying cargo up the trail to the landing field, but this small pocket of forest seemed an oasis of calm amidst the frenzy of preparation.

"I like this place," a voice said behind him.

It was Gotab's. His heart stopped in his chest. He turned very, very slowly.

The old man was leaning against a tree trunk. He lacked a helmet but was otherwise dressed in full Mandalorian armor. His arms were crossed over his chest and he had a peaceful, contemplative look on his face.

"You took it with you," he gestured to the armor.

"Except for the piece you claimed." He shifted his arms to show that the plate from his right forearm was missing.

Venku stared, but couldn't think of a word to say. He'd been hoping for this, yearning for it, resenting the fact that it hadn't happened. Now he got what he wanted, and he had absolutely no idea how to react.

Gotab craned his neck back and looked at the silver light filtering through the trees. "There's people up there. People who need to be stopped."

"Yuuzhan Vong," Venku said. He wondered if they could exist, somehow, after death. He wondered how their presence could register at all to someone like Gotab.

"Not just Yuuzhan Vong. Sith, too."

"Sith. *Kal'ba'buir* always used to say Sith and Jedi were too sides of the same coin."

"They are," Gotab said, "And the coin never stops spinning. But sometimes you have to pick a side."

"Picking an *aruatii* side got my father killed."

"I know." The ghost looked grave.

"So what does it matter if we fight the Sith?"

"What does the Force tell you?"

"The Force and I haven't been on speaking terms since I was two years old."

"You are now, aren't you?"

Venku fought a sigh. He'd heard that Force ghosts were supposed to be blue and wavey and cryptic. Gotab looked like he was right in front of Venku, as real as the trees, but he sure had the cryptic part down.

Gotab seemed to sense his frustration. "I can't tell you what to do. You're your own man and always have been. But this planet needs defending."

"This planet..."

He trailed off. He wanted to say this planet was just like any other, and that it had just been overhyped by mystical Jedi nonsense. But he knew that wasn't true. This planet had brought Gotab to life before his eyes. It had healed him when he was injured and dying. If nothing else, he owed Zonama Sekot for that.

He would be a poor man if he didn't pay his debts. Even debts to *aruetiise*. "All right," he said. "I'll do what I can. But I have to know... That is, I wondered... What is it like, being dead?"

A tight smile creased the old ghost's face. "It's a little hard to describe."

"I mean... Can you... touch others, others who are gone?" They both knew what he wanted to ask, but couldn't bear to.

The smile tilted slightly, becoming wistful and a little sad. "If I want to, yes."

"And... Have you tried to...?" He had a hard time saying it.

That soft smile froze on Gotab's face. Venku felt something, first tingling in the back of his mind, then reaching out to touch his awareness fully.

He felt dizzy, short of breath. He had not felt this sensation since he was a very small child, but it had lingered with him in the back of his memory for the rest of his life. It felt sad and happy, warm and cool, all at the same time.

He felt the palm of a hand, feather-soft, run across face.

I love you, a voice whispered in his head. *And I am proud*.

"Your mother says-"

"I heard her." Tears ran down his rough cheeks. "I heard."

His vision swam. He wiped his eyes clear with his hand, and saw he was alone once again.

It took him a while to compose himself, but when he did, he walked all the way up to the top of the slope. Mereel, Bess, and Jendri were still leaning against the fence. None of them noticed his approach.

He half-fell against the fence right next to Mereel, jerking all three of them out of their thoughts.

"You were gone a while," Mereel said.

"I had to talk to someone." He glanced over his shoulder at the town. "The Magister's going to give a talk pretty soon. Explain what the *shab* is going on. We should be there."

"You thinking of lending a hand, *Kad'ika*?" Mereel raised a gray eyebrow.

He looked at the three expectant faces: two male, one female; two young, one so very old; at a glance you could tell all of them were family.

And so was he.

"Yes," he said. "We're going to help."

Jendri blinked, like he was surprised. Bess tensed but looked ready for anything.

As for Mereel, he gave a wolfish grin and patted Venku on the shoulder. "Like *Kal'buir* used to say, if you can't do something smart, do something right."

From the inside of the Magister's daumutek, he could hear the restless murmur of the crowd gathered in the center of the village. He could picture, in his mind's eye, a confused mass of Yuuzhan Vong, Ferroans, humans, and other aliens of all possible allegiances, thrown together by circumstances beyond their imagining for a final battle.

If he stood up and walked out the door, he could see it with his own eyes, but Jacen remained in the daumutek, thinking.

He had explained his plan that morning, and now Danni was going to explain that plan to the waiting throng. There was no reason for him to listen. More importantly, everyone had agreed that he should keep out of public sight for now. His resurrection was hard enough for him to understand; for other beings it would be impossible.

He sat cross-legged on Danni's floor, hands clasped on his knees, and stared at the curve of the wall in front of him. He tried to reach into the future, but this time no visions came. He was unsurprised; they never did when he wanted them to. Just when he needed answers the most, he was left with too many questions.

"You should be used to that by now," Vergere's voice said softly.

Jacen looked to see the image of his teacher squatting on birdlike legs beside him. He did not feel her presence in the Force, and understood that he was merely looking at another of Zonama Sekot's projections. He felt disappointed, because there was much he still wanted to ask Vergere, but deep down he knew he would find no truth in her.

"You are restless," Sekot pressed. "Do you not have faith in your plan?"

"No," Jacen said. "Do you?"

Vergere's feathered crest rose. "If you do not believe in your plan, then why did you propose it?"

"It was the best I could think of. You wanted a way to defend yourself without having to kill again. It was the best idea

Vergere and I could come up with. I have no idea if it will work."

"I think it will," Sekot said, then added, "To a point."

"Everything works, to a point." Jacen shrugged irritably. "I just wish I could do more."

"All living beings have to come to terms with their own imperfection. Even the most powerful of us has to work within limits."

"Even you?"

"Very much so. Over time I think I've become comfortable in my limits. You, however, seem restless still."

"I am," he admitted. "There are too many unknowns. I don't know if I can stop the enemy fleets. I don't know if I can stop the Dark Man. I don't know if I—"

"Tsssk," Sekot made a very Vergere-like sound. "I, I, I. Not everything in the universe is about *you*, Jacen Solo. Or me, or your Dark Man. The Force embraces everything."

"I know," he sighed. "I just hate feeling... *limited*, especially when I know I've touched something greater, sometime more unified. Image what it would be like for you, if everything you are was shoved into a humanoid body and you had to live a normal life until you died. Wouldn't you feel frustrated? Wouldn't you crave what you once had, and do anything to get back there?"

Sekot made a sighing sound. "I believe one human poet once mused that if a man should dream of paradise, then wake to find a flower in his hand as proof that he had been there, ah, what then?"

"If I could just forget that paradise, I feel my life would have been... very different."

Vergere's head cocked. "You think would not have fallen to the dark?"

"I don't know." He stared at his hands. "I might not have gone off on my five-year-journey. I wouldn't have seen the Throne of Balance, and probably wouldn't have apprenticed under Lumiya. I might have settled for a normal life, maybe gotten together with Tenel Ka like *normal* beings do. And Allana..."

He trailed off. So many regrets were making him sick in his stomach. The more he thought, the more he was faced with the

horrible enormity of his betrayal. He could not think of a single person he'd loved whom he hadn't damaged in pursuit of his so-called noble goal.

"Have you touched them with the Force?"

He shook his head. "I can't."

"I'm sure that if you reached—"

"No. I don't want to hurt them. And it would distract me, which I can't afford if I'm going to fight the Dark Man."

"Ah, still sacrificing things for the greater good."

"In this case, I *have* to." He bristled. "You should act more grateful. I'm doing this for you, you know."

Vergere's head cocked. "Are you now?"

"You don't want to have to take lives. That's why we came up this plan, to keep the moral burden off you. And I'm going to fight the Dark Man, and kill him, to protect you. All of this is for you, Sekot. I don't..."

He didn't want to hurt the only being he'd loved and not betrayed.

Vergere's head inclined in understanding. "I am more grateful than I can say, Jacen Solo."

Outside, the crowd started to hush. Danni must have mounted the podium. Tahiri, Jaina, and Harrar were probably up there as well. He longed to be with his friends right now, but he knew he didn't deserve it.

"I will tell you one last thing, Jacen," Sekot said. "As of now this is no longer about *you*. It is not about your visions, your moment of perfection, your fall to the dark or your redemption. My fate, and the galaxy's fate, no longer rest on you."

Jacen frowned. If Sekot was trying to comfort him, take the pressure off him, it wasn't going to work.

A feathered hand reached out and pressed weight on his shoulder. "When you go into battle with the Dark Man, Jaina and Ben will be at your side. So will Tahiri and Danni, Harrar and all your allies in space. So will Kenobi and your grandfather."

The feathered hand moved to tap his chest. "You need not have searched the galaxy for the Unifying Force; the Unifying Force is *here*. Reach within yourself and you will find that there is no memory, no past, no future, no light and no dark.

Call it the Unifying Force, the Universe or Existence: those are only words. They are *lies*, because the truth is always greater than the words we use to describe it."

A hauntingly familiar smile came to Vergere's face. He stared into the black wells of her eyes and was no longer sure if he was looking at a simulacrum, or the true Vergere, or both at once or neither.

"There is only a dance, and once you accept your place in it you have nothing to fear. From the whirl of quarks to the wheel of galaxies, all is motion, Jacen Solo. All is dance. All *is*."

The crowd that gathered in the center of the village was as motley a collection as Tahiri had ever seen. Though preparations continued in the landing field, the space was nonetheless packed shoulder-to-shoulder with a variety of beings, all of whom had turned their attention to the wood-cut podium that had been placed in the square's center. Tahiri stood at the edge of it now, looking out at all the myriad faces.

She saw Ferroans aplenty, and many Yuuzhan Vong. Of the Yuuzhan Vong, there was a great variety. She saw warriors with piercings and tattoos marking their faces, while others, followers of the Ganner sect, looked almost human with their untouched miens. She saw Extolled with all manner of deformities standing side-by-side with shapers in their writhing headdresses.

There were plenty more not from Zonama Sekot. It seemed like everyone sent down from Trinity Fleet had gathered here. She saw blue Alliance uniforms and olive-gray Imperial onces, and two Chiss with white jackets and glowing red eyes. She saw a cluster of four beings in heavy armor, three with the T-visor buckets of the Mandalorians while the last wore a battered white ARC Clone trooper helmet from almost seventy years ago.

A little way away, she saw a big brown-furred Wookiee standing head and shoulders taller than her companions: a white-haired man, a red Devaronian, a Yuuzhan Vong in a green Alliance jumpsuit, and a tall woman with dirty-blond hair spread over her shoulders and lightsaber dangling from her belt.

Then she looked at the platform on which she herself stood. On the far side corner, opposite her, Jaina Solo looked out on the crowd with an alert, controlled expression that betrayed none of the anxiety radiating off her through the Force. Harrar, in priest's turban and robes, stood at the back of the platform, while Danni Quee was stepping up front to give her address.

As for Jacen Solo, she could sense his presence from his viewing spot, cloaked and in the shadows, hiding at the edge of the square.

When Danni stepped to the edge of the platform the crowd stopped chattering and fell silent. A warm, damp breeze blew beneath the sky gray and tossed the pale curls around Danni's head.

The Magister froze, like she'd forgotten what to say.

Tahiri knew it was more than that. In a lot of ways, Danni was like her. They'd both journeyed through different phases in their lives, and been different things to different people. They'd both lost people they'd loved, and had to deal with that loss. They'd both known a strong connection to the Force, and in Tahiri's case been an active Jedi for years, but in the end the Order hadn't been a home for either of them.

They'd both found some their only solace on Zonama Sekot, and now had come to time to defend it once again.

"Thank you for being here today," Danni began. "I want you to know that your courage, your devotion, won't be forgotten here."

"Under the wise guidance of the Jedi, we have decided on a plan to meet the people who will be coming." She gestured to Jaina, then Tahiri. "Some of them want to protect us. Some wish us harm. Some, I think, haven't made up their minds.

"In just a few minutes, every space-worthy vessel on Zonama Sekot will fly into orbit and greet our new arrivals. The fleet known as True Honor is already in orbit, but has not yet attacked us. We hope, and pray, that the beings in that fleet will not attack their homeworld. However, the same will not be true of the fleets still en route to Zonama Sekot.

"Therefore, your ships will form a protective barrier around the Trinity Fleet commanded by Jagged Fel. If True Honor wishes to fire on them, it will have to fire through you."

Tahiri could feel the tension ripple through the crowd. It was plain on their faces and plan through the Force.

"Sekot still want to bring its children home," Danni pressed. "It wants to bring it family together. If True Honor does not attack you, we will have proof that they do not wish to harm the people of Zonama Sekot, and we will welcome them home.

"If they *do* attack you," Danni turned grave, "Then Zonama Sekot will defend itself by whatever means it has."

That sent another shock wave through the crowd. People began to whisper, and whispers became chatters and shouting.

"There is something else!" Danni held up both hands. When people had quieted enough, she said, "There is one more matter of supreme importance that must be dealt with.

"Amidst the True Honor fleet, working with them, guiding them, and manipulating them for their own evil purposes, are the Sith."

Unsurprisingly, that got people even more alarmed. Danni had to shout over them, "We have a plan for dealing with the Sith. With them defeated, I believe we stand an excellent chance of bringing True Honor back home."

She gestured to Tahiri. "Jedi Veila, known to many of you as Riina Kwaad, will lead an assault team into orbit. Once there, she will use the Force to locate the Sith. We are confident that the Sith, while working with Yuuzhan Vong, must have their own base of operations, likely a ship of their own. The assault team will board the Sith vessel and defeat those onboard."

People still kept shouting, and Danni raised her voice again. "Riina Kwaad will be the leader of this expedition, and she will be the only Jedi. Jedi Solo is needed elsewhere. Making up the rest of her team are a group selected specifically to battle against Force-users.

"Twenty years ago, brave Yuuzhan Vong warriors were the bane of the Jedi order. This time around, they will be the bane of the Sith."

More surprise rippled through the crowd, but a series of loud cheers also arose from a collection of Yuuzhan Vong in battle armor. They raised their amphistaffs in the air and shouted, "*Voo'lar ku'lak merdal Jeedai! Voo'lar ku'lak seltok av Ganner! Voo'lar ku'lak seltok av Ganner!*"

She glanced at Jaina. There was a rare smile on her face that suggested she didn't need translation.

Once the warriors had finished their battle cry, Danni raised her hands for quiet. When the crowd had subdued itself, she said, "What we need from all of you today is trust. Trust in the Force, trust in the gods, trust in Zonama Sekot. Most of all, you need to trust in each other. So I want you all to look around.

"See the people next to you. Some of them have been on this world all their lives. Some of them just showed up two days ago. Today we have all come together for a common purpose, a common goal. Today, these are your brothers and sisters. If you do not fail them, they will not fail you.

"So I thank you all. May the Force, the Gods, and good luck be with us all."

She stepped back, and the cheers rose. Tahiri only saw a little sigh, but she felt relief and exhaustion pour of the Magister. She stepped off the platform, shadowed by Harrar. Tahiri gave Jaina a nod, and the two of them followed.

It took almost five minutes to make their way through the jostling, nervous, excited crowd to the Magister's daumutek. When they ducked inside, they saw Jacen standing in the alcove in the far side of the room. The shackles on his wrists were gone, and he, like Jaina and Tahiri, wore a black tactical vest and layor of armor over a dark camo jumpsuit.

Seeing him immediately stopped up all the elation and energy Tahiri had felt during the speech. Every time she looked at him she felt an impossible mess of emotions; resentment, bitterness, and outright hatred mixed with sympathy, pity, even the echo of a love that could have been. Most of all, she felt fear. Not fear of what he had already done- she knew he could never hurt her like that again- but fear of the unknown. The man in front of her had been many things in life, and in death he'd been reduced to a scar. In that, he was not unlike his brother. Now, resurrected, he seemed a strangle jumble of all the different Jacens she'd known. She couldn't figure out if he was Jacen the confused student, Jacen the noble Jedi, Jacen the cold manipulator, or Jacen the brutal Sith.

Right now, though, the thin smile on his lips seemed genuine.

"That was a very good speech, Danni," he said, and there even seemed to be real warmth in his voice. Tahiri hadn't heard that since the *last* time they'd both been on Zonama Sekot.

"Thank you, Jacen." Danni sounded surprised.

"Are you going to be staying with the village?"

"Harrar and I will stay here, yes." Danni placed a hand on the priest's shoulder. "As long as the communication system remains operable, we think it would be best to direct the mission from here."

"Of course." Jacen took three steps forward. Danni flinched, but didn't step away. Jacen took two more steps closer, putting him within arm's reach.

For a minute they stared each other in the eye and said nothing. There was probably too much to say, but even without the Force, Tahiri knew what it came down to. Regrets, missed chances, might-have-beens. And the resolve to keep moving forward, no matter how hard the past dragged down.

Finally, Jacen extended a hand. "Stay safe, Danni."

"You too, Jacen." Her voice broke as she took his hand and shook. "I hope... you find what you need, Jacen."

"I'd wish you the same, but I think you already have."

Danni sniffed, stalled for words, and finally said, "Thanks, Jacen. I think you're right."

Danni was the one release his grip. Jacen turned to Harrar and offered his hand again.

"I'm glad you're still around," he said. "I'm glad you're still giving guidance to people."

"A priest exists to serve," Harrar said. "In that, we are not unlike the Jedi."

A sad smile twisted Jacen's face. "I guess that's right, isn't it?"

Finally, he turned to Tahiri. Their eyes met, held, and for a second everything they'd shared flowed between them: loss, grief, trust, hope, despair, suspicion, resentment, guilt, hatred. Then they both looked down.

He didn't dare offer his hand. Both of them stayed at his side, balled in anxious fists. She realized he was having as much difficulty with this as she was.

"You've gotten stronger," he said at last. "I know it's in spite of me, not because of me, but I'm glad. I'm truly, honestly glad

for that. You've always deserved better than what you got, Tahiri. I hope you can find some peace after this."

The sincerity in his voice caused a tightness in her chest. Her eyes didn't get wet, her vision didn't swim with tears, but she felt like they were about to any moment.

She still couldn't look him in the eye.

She sucked in breath and said, "I think I'm getting closer. Closer than I've been in... a long, long time. I've just got to get past one more hurdle."

"Stay safe up there."

Her body shook in a dry laugh. "I'm going to be leading a commando raid on a ship full of *Sith*, Jacen. There's going to be nothing safe about it."

"Well, stay brave then. And stay alive."

"I'll do my best," she sniffed, and picked up her head at last. Jacen's was still lowered, but he started to raise it, slowly, cautiously.

Their eyes met again, and everything flowed between them again. This time Tahiri was ready for the past. She could handle it. She could stay strong.

"I know this doesn't make up for what I've done. I know I can't atone, but I want you to know... I'm sorry, Tahiri. I'm so sorry for everything I did to you."

Awkwardly, finally, Jacen extended a hand.

Tahiri took it. Her knees felt weak and before she knew it she had fallen against him and wrapped both arms around his torso. Jacen's own hands rested cautiously on her shoulders.

"Aw, Sithspit," Tahiri pressed her face against his chest-plate. "I've missed you, Jacen. *My* Jacen. The one who said I'd always be family."

"You are," Jacen muttered into the crown of her hair.

Tahiri pumped out a breath and pushed away. Jacen's pale, taut face was soft with emotion now. He looked away, but she did not feel rejected this time.

Her vision shifted past Jacen's shoulder, to his sister. Jaina was standing to the side, arms wrapped around herself, saying nothing. Tahiri could see the wet gleam in her eyes and the tension in her body.

"Stay alive, Jaina. And brave."

"I'll remember that," she nodded.

She glanced between the twins. They were still avoiding each other with their eyes, and with the Force as well.

"Jaina, I've given you some good advice in the past, right?"

"You have," Jaina allowed.

She stepped up to the other woman and placed firm hands on her shoulders. "You're going to have to trust the Force on this one, *really* trust it."

Trust the Force, and trust her brother. Tahiri didn't have to say it. They all knew it, everyone in the room.

"I'll try," Jaina nodded, still uncertain.

"I think a little green guy once said something about *doing*, not trying."

"I'll do it then," she said. "I'll do it."

Tahiri stepped back and looked over the room: Danni and Harrar, stiff with determination. Jaina and Jacen, still apart.

She didn't know if she'd see any of them again, but she dearly wanted to. Every one of them.

Like Jaina, she would have to trust the Force.

"I have to get going," she took another step toward the door. "I've got a commando mission to run and all that. But, well... may the Force be with you all."

"I think... it just might be." Jacen said, a hint of wonder in his voice. "For the first time in a *very* long while."

Chapter 26

The Sekotan ships moved effortlessly through the atmosphere, cutting through the low-hanging clouds and bursting out into sunlight like a flock of smooth gleaming birds. The landscape of clouds fell away beneath them and they climbed higher still, until the pale blue of the sky faded way to the sprawling, star-spangled blackness of space.

Scut leaned forward in his pilot's seat, searching the emptiness ahead with his eyes. At first he couldn't see them, but as the drew farther from the planet's ambient glow his eyes began to pick up that same glow reflecting off the rugged yorik coral hulls of over two dozen Yuuzhan Vong capital ships.

Scut's mouth went dry. He'd seen them so many times in holos, studied them with a warring mixture of scholarly detachment and intense personal interest, but he'd never expected to see so many with his own eyes.

He certainly never expected to be flying right into the middle of the fleet in an unarmed ship.

"How's it handling?" Tahiri asked from the co-pilot's seat.

"It's smooth," he admitted. "Very nimble. Good for a getaway, if we have to."

"Let's hope we *don't*," Tahiri said.

Scut glanced over his shoulders. Most of the warriors were packed in the cargo room in the rear of the shuttle, but a few remained in the back of the cockpit. In addition to a pair of smooth-faced warriors from the Ganner sect, the Extolled Narith stood in one corner, while the shaper Kodra Val hovered behind the pilot's seat.

As Scut went back to staring at the looming Yuuzhan Vong fleet, Kodra Val leaned over his shoulder and said in her native tongue, "Is the tizworym working?"

The creature nestled in Scut's ear vibrated the bones in his skull, relaying Kodra Val's words to his brain in Basic. The implant still felt strange and intrusive, but he acknowledged he was going to need it if he was going to be working with the rest of these Yuuzhan Vong.

"It does," he said in Basic. "Thank you."

Kodra Val nodded, satisfied, but remained over his shoulder. He glanced at Tahiri and asked, "Any idea where those Sith are?"

"I'm working on it." Tahiri's scarred brow was wrinkled in concentration. "I'm just trying to pick up basic sensations... I don't want to touch any minds, specifically. That might give us away."

"You are our yammosk, Riina Kwaad," Kodra Val said, still in Yuuzhan Vong.

"Not at all," she replied in the same language. "Yammosks aren't supposed to be on the front lines. They get protected by everybody else. But believe me, when we get on that Sith ship, I'll be right in front."

"You are a brave warrior." The way Kodra Val said *warrior* made the compliment seem begrudging.

"I'm not a warrior. I'm not *anything*. I'm just me." Tahiri said. "Now please, let me concentrate."

"Fine," Scut said. "Let's just enjoy the ominous silence for a while."

If he was with Wraith Squadron, someone would have chimed in with a joke or witty comment. Instead it was met with the exact ominous silence he'd requested, which was the opposite of what he really wanted.

Jesmin, Sharr, Drikall, and Huhunna were on the line too, crammed into another shuttle. Scut had asked Sharr for permission to join Tahiri's attack squad, and his request had been reluctantly granted. Now that he was up here, getting ever closer to the True Honor fleet while his co-pilot plotted a collision course with the Sith, he didn't know what in the galaxy had *ever* made him think this was a good idea.

It had something to do with proving himself, probably. He'd always wanted to prove himself. Usually it was proving to people in the Galactic Alliance that he was like *them*, not the hated Yuuzhan Vong. Now that he was among the Yuuzhan Vong, he felt a strong urge to prove he *was* like them. Apparently volunteering for an ultra-dangerous, probably-suicidal, but extremely important mission was supposed to prove himself to the Yuuzhan Vong, or prove himself *to* himself, or something.

Maybe it would all make sense when he wasn't so damned nervous.

"I sense something," Tahiri muttered beside him. She did it in Yuuzhan Vong.

"Sith?" Scut asked.

She nodded. "I feel this concentration of energy... very dark, cold... Very angry."

Scut checked his console. The active sensors were running a scan on the fleet up ahead. It rattled off a list of Yuuzhan Vong frigate, corvette, and heavy cruiser analogs. The list was as monotonous as it was frightening.

Then something strange popped up. The scanner read simply: *Unidentified ship*.

"Well, *that's* unusual," he muttered. He punched the buttons and tried to get a more thorough scan, including telemetry for the unknown vessel.

"Have you found it?" Narith rasped from behind Tahiri's chair.

"Maybe... Could just be wonky sensors." Scut said. He glanced at his copilot and saw her staring ahead with a look of furious concentration.

"We'll be getting within their firing range soon," Kodra Val said.

Scut turned on the comlink and punched in the code for the shuttle the rest of the Wraiths were in.

"Smarty, this is Scut. Do you copy?"

"Smarty here," Sharr's voice crackled. "You hanging in there?"

"For now. We're close to weapons range. Any sign they have guns hot?"

"Nothing on my scanners. Yours?"

"Nothing." Scut didn't let himself feel hopeful. If they really wanted to destroy the incoming Sekotan fleet- and *fleet* was a big overstatement for a few dozen ships, none bigger than bulk freighter- they would wait until they were close enough to be easy targets.

"Any sign of your target, Scut?"

"Maybe." He glanced at the scanner readout. That ship was still listed as *unidentified*, but now he had a telemetry readout pointing to the ship's location. Just his luck, it sat smack in the center of the True Honor fleet.

"That's it," Tahiri said, sudden conviction in her voice. "Set course but don't accelerate. I don't want to be obvious."

"Copy that," Scut said. "You hear, Smarty?"

"We heard. We'll stay on your wing. Keep you from standing out."

"Thanks," he said, and adjusted his course heading.

By now they were within firing range of the Yuuzhan Vong ships. He still wasn't getting any sign that their weapons were aimed at him. He held his breath as one frigate loomed ever closer. As he watched he began to make out all the jagged spikes and rough curves of its asymmetric, organic surface. He couldn't help but marvel at the feat of bio-engineering it took to create a living vessel that large and complex. It was beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

He held course and sailed right under its belly.

When they passed out from under it he released a big breath and checked his scanners. Still no sign of weapons aimed at him. The other Sekotan shuttles were passing into the Yuuzhan Vong fleet as well, and none of them had been fired on either. At the same time, none of the Yuuzhan Vong ships had hailed them via either traditional communications wavelengths or the villips that had been installed next to the comm systems on all Sekotan shuttles.

"Slow down," Tahiri said.

"I thought we were going for the Sith ship?"

"We are. Just not yet."

Scut decelerated. He glanced at his scanners and saw Sharr's shuttle doing to same.

Tahiri reached up, plucked a comm-speaker from her console, and brought it to her mouth. "All ships, this is Riina Kwaad. Cut engines and hold position." She repeated the order in Basic and the entire fleet slowed to a halt.

For a long, quiet, ominous moment, the Sekotan vessels hung interspersed in the mist of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Scut froze with his hands on the shuttle's control sticks, afraid that the slightest movement from him would bring down a rain of hellfire from the nearest frigate.

Another long moment passed. Another. Nothing happened. Scut should have felt relieved, but he wasn't.

"What are waiting for?" he whispered.

"Friends," Tahiri said simply.

"What about the Sith vessel?" Narith asked.

"If we go for it now you can bet all the True Honor ships will start shooting at us."

"Well we don't want *that* to happen," Koda Val said.

"So what?" asked Scut, "We wait until the shooting starts, *then* make a run for the Sith?"

"Pretty much," she admitted.

"I thought we were trying to prevent a shooting war from happening at all."

Tahiri gave him a look that said how likely she thought *that* would be.

Scut looked back out at the stars, and the Yuuzhan Vong capital ships strung out line asteroids in Zonama Sekot's orbit. If he didn't know better, he'd think they *were* asteroids, and just as harmless. He tried to spot this Sith vessel they were heading toward, but he saw nothing.

His sensor board started beeping. New signals were appearing in Zonama Sekot's orbit, just outside the ring of True Honor vessels.

"See," Tahiri pointed to the gray-black wedge of *Starless* at the head of the arriving fleet. "Friends."

When Trinity Fleet emerged from hyperspace, Jagged Fel was immediately very glad and very horrified that his decision to put all crew on red alert had been justified.

Standing on the bridge of *Starless*, right near her forward viewport, he had an excellent view of Zonama Sekot, all green and blue and white, which made his heart swell. And, drifting in front of the pristine planet, was the chain of asteroid-shaped silhouettes that made his heart sink into his gut.

"All ships, battle stations," he called. "Bring guns about. All ships, launch fighters."

"Copy, Commander," the tactical lieutenant called.

"Spade, Dagger, Torch, and Wraith Squadrons away," Syal Antilles reported from the crew pit.

Jag watched soberly as the burning engine-flares of *Starless's* fighters shot out in a chain beyond the destroyer's bow. Syal's sister was in one of those snubfighters, and his own was launching from *Vindicator* somewhere to his flagship's starboard side. He would have preferred that Wynssa had remained on *Vindicator* or *Phoenix*, as he'd tried to force on his sister for her own protection. Wynssa, of course, wanted to be on the front lines with her Chiss pilots, like the fine soldier she was.

He felt like his heart was going to leap out of his throat.

Jag made his way to the tactical station. "Lieutenant, do we have a readout on those Vong ships?"

"Aye, sir," said the squat young Sullustan.

"What have we got?"

"Almost twenty ships, sir," the Sullustan said as Jag looked over the tactical holo. As reported, the Vong fleet was spread like a chain around Zonama Sekot's middle orbit. However, mixed in with the bright red holo-markers were a number of small blue dots.

"What are those unknowns?" he asked.

"They're... unknown sir," the lieutenant said awkwardly.

"More Vong?"

"Maybe, sir. We, ah—"

"Commander," Syal said as she climbed out of the crew pit, "We've got an incoming comm signal. Undetermined source."

"All right, pipe it in to this station," he said.

A moment later a voice crackled over the tactical console's speakers. "*Starless*, this is Smarty. Repeat, this is Smarty. Do you copy?"

Jagged frowned. "Smarty, this is *Starless*. Identify yourself. Plainly."

"Ah, sorry, Commander. This is Sharr Latt of the Wraiths."

Syal Antilles, now at Jagged's side, released a short sigh of relief. She asked, "Smarty, are those your ships?"

"Copy that, Captain Antilles. We've got about two dozen Sekotan ships, heading your way now."

"Mister Latt, were you just floating in the middle of the enemy fleet?" Jag asked sharply.

"More or less, sir. We've got a lot of Yuuzhan Vong aboard and I guess those guys don't want to fire on their own people."

Jag saw a chance and took it. "Mister Latt, I want your people to spread out and form a--"

"Already on it, Commander. We're creating a barrier between your people and the Vong fleet."

Jag thought he heard the loud groan of a Wookiee in the background.

"Oh, right," Latt added. "Climber says you should pull those snubfighters away. If they get too close to the Vong, they might start firing on all of us."

"Copy that. Complying." Jag switched off the link. "Lieutenant, tell all fighters to peel back."

"On it, Commander."

Jag looked at Syal and saw the same relief that was probably on his face. That relief quickly returned to concern.

"How long do you think we can hold like this?" Syal asked.

"I don't know. We could try and comm the Vong flagship, offer terms of a truce."

"A truce? With Yuuzhan Vong fanatics?"

"Well, it's either that or strike one with Daala, because we don't have enough ships to handle their whole fleet."

"Unless Zonama Sekot lends a hand again."

"If the Yuuzhan Vong won't attack Sekot, Sekot probably won't attack its own children either." Jag shook his head. "At this point, I see no reason *not* to try."

Syal raised an eyebrow. "You could inadvertently say something insulting and provoke an attack."

"Point," Jag admitted. "But the risk's about the same with Daala."

He spun on his heel and headed for the communications station. "Lieutenant," he called, "I want you to fix me up something very special..."

In truth, Vilath Dal would have felt more comfortable on the Sith vessel right now. *Revenge* may have been terribly ancient and alien and packed full of beings who clearly didn't like him, but truth be told, *Honor Regained* wasn't so different.

Like a lot of Yuuzhan Vong, he'd grown up with a strong affinity for his own caste and propensity for looking down on the others. Like a lot of shapers specifically, he'd long held the belief that the warriors were pig-headed, savage, and generally wouldn't be worth a damn without the weapons bred for them by their scientifically-minded betters.

Right now, standing on the bridge of Maal Lah's flagship, he was the only shaper on a ship full of warriors, all seething with bloodlust at the sight of the new fleet.

He was thankful for Maal Lah, at least. The veteran commander was not yet baying like a hound and charging in. He stood in the middle of the bridge's tactical niche, watching multi-colored insects swarm upward on a chatter of wings and imitate the layout of the battlezone. Vilath Dal watched from a slight distance, while the warmaster's younger domain-sibling Voran Lah stood anxiously at his side.

"We should attack," Voran Lah ground his teeth. "Now! Before they can deploy their forces."

Maal Lah shook his head and pointed to a thin line of white insects stretched out between two facing fleets. "The vessels from Zonama Sekot have taken position between our two fleets. They wish to prevent a fight."

"We should have fired on them when they first left orbit."

Maal Lah stalked over to his second. "Stop acting the fool. Even if I did give the order to fire on fellow Yuuzhan Vong, how many captains would obey?"

"They should *all* follow. You *are* our Warmaster,"

Maal Lah pointed to the insect display again. "Do you see? The infidels are also holding to their side of the line."

"For now. Likely they are taking proper placement so they may attach us when the time is ready."

"They are less than half our strength," Vilath Dal spoke up. "They want a fight less than we do."

Voran Lah snarled at the shaper's intrusion, but Maal Lah asked calmly, "And what do you suggest? That we instead hold position and wait for the second infidel fleet to arrive?"

"The infidels war among themselves," Vilath Dal sniffed. "All the more reason for us not to."

"Yet they may easily decide to unite against us as a common enemy," Maal Lah looked at the display again, considering his options.

"Battle will come, sooner or later," pressed Voran Lah. Better for us if we start it on our terms."

"Warmaster!" a young female subaltern approached. "The enemy commander requests to speak with you!"

"A delaying tactic," said Voran Lah.

Maal Lah held up one hand. "I will speak with him via villip."

"Very good, Warmaster," the subaltern bowed.

Maal Lah strode over to the grotto on the opposite side of the bridge where a large villip sat. Vilath Dal and Voran Lah followed, but stood two meters away while their commander stroked the villip to life. The brown gelatinous sack warped in shape to take on the features of a human male with some manner of patch over his left eye and a scar across his forehead.

"This is Commander Jagged Fel," the man said. "I wish to speak to the leader of the Yuuzahn Vong fleet."

"You are speaking to him," Maal Lah leaned forward with interest. "Tell me, are you the Jagged Fel who fought our fleet at the planet called Ylesia?"

"I am" Fel said. "And who are you?"

"My name is Warmaster Maal of Domain Lah. I lost a leg at Ylesia, Commander. Tell me, did you sacrifice your eye to the gods there as well?"

"I'm sorry, no," Fel said. "This was a more recent... sacrifice."

"Your scars show you are a brave warrior. Do not expect me to be merciful."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Fel said.

Vilath Dal had spent enough time among infidels the past few months to know sarcasm when he heard it, but apparently Maal Lah had not.

“Good!” the warmaster boomed. “However, I see a collection of ships from Zonama Sekot have spread between us, as though they hope to prevent the inevitable.”

“I will not fire through those ships,” Fel said. His silence asked the same question back.

Maal Lah did not answer. Instead he asked, “What will you do when the second infidel fleet arrives? Ally with it against us, or try to fight both of us at once?”

“That fleet seeks to destroy Zonama Sekot and every last Yuuzhan Vong,” Fel said.

Maal Lah gave a proud laugh. “Let them try. You saw what happened the last time they attempted it.”

“I know,” Fel said, “But they’ll attempt it again if they think they can pit the two of us against each other. My mission is to stop the war here. We don’t have to fight each other.”

“You are an infidel and I am a Yuuzhan Vong,” Maal Lah snarled “Fighting is what my people were born for.”

“I disagree, but now’s not the time to argue,” Fel said. “Right now, we have no quarrel with you. We will not fire first. We will never fire through the screen of ships from Zonama Sekot.”

“Then you are clearly not the warrior I thought you were,” Maal Lah said. He reached out, stroke the villip, and banished the infidel commander’s image.

He turned on Voran Lah and Vilath Dal. The warrior shifted excitedly on his feet, while the shaper braced himself for the coming firefight.

“Put all ships on high alert,” he told his second. “Launch defensive coralskipper screens. Arm all cannons.”

“Very good Warmaster,” Voran Lah bowed.

Maal Lah held out a hand. “Let it be known that any pilots or gunners that fire on ships from Zonama Sekot will be executed without honor. I’ll allow no mistakes in this battle.”

Voran Lah looked up, confused. “Are we not to attack?”

“Not yet.”

“But soon?”

Maal Lah nodded. "Once we are fully in place."

"Excellent, Warmaster," Voran Lah bowed again, and went off to relay orders.

Maal Lah lingered by the vilip grotto and Vilath Dal moved to his side. "Do you intend to wait until the third fleet arrives? Or do you have some plan to circumvent the ships from the planet?"

Maal Lah glanced at the shaper. "You are not my tactician, Vilath Dal."

The warmaster was clearly agitated, and that probably meant he didn't have a clue what do. Vilath Dal said, "I meant no disrespect at all. I meant wondered whether--"

He held his words as a subaltern approached.

"Warmaster," she said. "Another communication. It is the Sith vessel."

For a second Maal Lah looked genuinely nervous. Then, fearless warrior again, he nodded and said, "Very well. Let them speak."

"Remind me again why this was a smart idea?" Jendri said as he leaned over the co-pilot's shoulder and looked out at the Yuuzhan Vong fleet spread between them and the broad, blue-and-green glow of Zonama Sekot.

"I didn't say it was a smart idea," Mereel said. "I said it *wasn't* a smart idea, only the right one."

"Oh," said Jendri. "And *why* was it the right one again?"

Mereel didn't seem to have an answer for that one.

The four of them were crowded inside the cockpit of a Sekotan shuttle, looking over the heads of two Ferroan pilots. They were dressed up in full battle-armor, including helmets. Apparently quite a few of the *vongese* remembered the Mandalorians as hated enemies during the war, and a large subset of those thought they were some kind of deadly humanoid droid. As a result, they'd been put on a shuttle with all humans and Ferroans as crew, which suited Venku and company just fine.

He was starting to have doubts about this mission. He felt very tiny and helpless as their unarmed shuttle, floated in the fragile blockade between the Vong fleet and the newly-arrived

Trinity forces. He did not like feeling tiny, or helpless. Whatever else he was, he was a *Mando*, and that meant he was at home *doing* things, fighting things, shooting things, not waiting for somebody else to shoot him first.

The others were clearly of the same opinion, though with their *buy'ce* headsets rescued from storage and stuck on their heads, at least they didn't bother their hosts with too much whining.

"These things are fast, right?" Jendri asked. "Nimble?"

"Sure felt that way," Bess told her brother.

"They haven't fired yet," Venku said.

He was frankly surprised by that. The *vongese* he'd fought had been savage animals. Either fifteen years on Zonama Sekot had mellowed even their renegades, or they truly were hesitant to fire on what they considered their own.

That, at least, Venku could respect. There had been conflicts in the past where different *Mando* groups had been hired by opposing sides and sent again each other. Under barely-existent leaders like Fett, it had become all too common, and it was something Venku had tried very hard to prevent. Getting involved in other peoples' wars had done his family enough damage.

So he kept thinking, but here he was anyway. It was strange how life worked out, but then, he'd never had a normal life.

"It does look like a standoff," Mereel observed.

"Just wait until Daala gets here," Bess said. "That'll end it real quick. I bet Fel's trying to patch a deal with the *vongese* before that old bird shows up."

"A deal with the *vongese*?" Mereel snarled. "Not *shabla* likely."

"He doesn't have the strength to win alone," Bess said. "It's either the crab boys or Daala. Definitely don't envy him the choice."

"I'd still rather be on a big star destroyer that floating around in this...whatever this is," said Jendri.

"You're telling me," Mereel said. "I didn't make it this far to get shot down when I can't shoot back."

Venku knew the feeling, but it must have been even stronger for Mereel. The old ARC trooper had seen the Clone Wars, the

Yuuzhan Vong invasion, two civil wars, and so many smaller conflicts, and somehow lived to tell the tale. He was a legend on Mandalore, and one of the last Jango Fett clones still alive.

To die like this, in a battle that the rest of the galaxy might never even hear of, would be both a tragedy and a humiliation. He knew Mereel was vain enough to be thinking the same thing.

Yet, somehow, Venku didn't believe that would happen. He was not typically an optimist, nor a believer in gut feelings, but this time was different.

Talking with his dead *buir*, feeling the touch of his mother gone sixty-five years, had shaken him to the core. It had been enough to force a sudden reversal of the vow he'd sworn to Gotab all those years ago, the vow to never get involved in someone else's wars and live only for the *Mando'ade*.

He'd broken that vow, but he wasn't bothered by it. Against all the instincts bred into him by a precarious mercenary's life, he found that he had *faith*. Faith in Gotab, faith in his mother, faith in Zonama Sekot.

Even faith in the Force.

Would the wonders never cease?

Then, calmly, precisely, the Ferroan pilot announced, "Incoming signal. Six capital ships just dropped out of hyperspace. She's here."

Chapter 27

Even as he walked through *Revenge's* winding corridors, Darth Krayt felt as though he had not truly left his dreaming state. Though he marched alongside Darth Wyyrlok, he was also engaged in ferocious combat on a plain of black stone, swinging and spinning both his lightsabers against a pair of attackers. They fought and fought, and he neither killed them nor they killed him. It was as though the battle was a hinge of fate that not even his visions could see clearly.

When that scene had first come to him, he couldn't believe it was real. Darth Caedus was dead, murdered by his own sister. The great hero Jacen Solo had fallen to become a mad and pathetic Sith Lord, bringing only chaos and pain to a galaxy instead of the order he craved. He had been ultimate proof of the foolishness of the old Rule of Two, and his ignominious defeat had driven even more Dark Side users into the envelope of Krayt's One Sith.

Caedus was dead. He could never come back. And yet, impossibly, Krayt had seen the dead failure waiting for him down on Zonama Sekot. The fact that he'd had no visions of Luke Skywalker's son, despite the boy being his main target, was even more disturbing.

He remembered that the planet's living consciousness could supposedly take the image of beings it had met. It was possible that the thing in his vision had been Sekot in Jacen Solo's skin. That was the more likely case, though the idea of Caedus fully returning from the dead was both terrifying and intriguing.

Krayt tried to focus on the Sith Lord walking beside him, in order to banish the visions before they pulled him back into his dreaming state. Normally Darth Wyyrlok's stern, horned face gave him feelings of companionship and strength, but something was different now. He could not forget his brief vision of Wyyrlok standing over the prone body of his master, mouth curved in a sadistic grin as he pumped Force lightning from his fingertips.

"My Lord is troubled," Wyyrlok offered.

Krayt shook his head. He would never tell Wyyrlok about that vision of betrayal. It was, after all, only a dream, and many of his dreams did not come true.

He would put it out of his mind. For now.

"Have you sensed the location of Skywalker's son?" Wyyrlok asked.

Krayt almost said that Skywalker's son was on Ossus with the rest of his Jedi Order. But of course, to Wyyrlok, *Skywalker* meant Luke. To Krayt, *Skywalker* would always be Anakin. Even in his dreams, he could see Anakin's anger in the blond man's eyes, and the same confident tilt of the head.

"I have not... felt Ben Skywalker. Not yet. As we get closer to the planet, I believe I will."

He didn't know if it would come through visions, or some beacon of the boy's presence in the Force, but he knew it would come. Destiny had already propelled him to the brink of victory. With Skywalker's grandson dead the blond man who stalked his dreams would be gone, and he could turn his attention to the corruption Zonama Sekot and sowing chaos and fear throughout the galaxy, for which his One Sith would present the only viable solution.

Revenge was not a large ship, but it possessed room for one attack shuttle in a sealed bay in its ventral section. When Krayt and Wyyrlok arrived in the chamber, they were greeted by four of his Sith in dark robes, two on either side of the dagger-shaped shuttle's extended landing ramp. Standing at the feet of the ramp were two more figures: Dician, dressed in a black jumpsuit with a heavy pack on her back, and Darth Nether, dressed in his customary robes.

"Come to see us off, Lord Nether?" asked Wyyrlok.

The blind old Dornean gave a quick bow. "I offer four of our finest swordsmen, my Lords. They will assist you in your mission to kill Skywalker's son."

Grandson, Krayt thought.

"And what of you?" Wyyrlok asked Dician.

"As Lord Krayt's physician, I request permission to accompany him on this mission," Dician said, looking straight at her master.

He stared back. She didn't flinch, didn't quaver the slightest bit. Though she was not as strong in the Force as his Lords, she was more loyal and brave than the lot of them.

"Very well," Krayt said. "You may come with us. As for these swordsmen of yours, Darth Nether, let me look at them."

"Raise your heads!" Nether commanded.

Four snapped up, throwing back their black hoods. Krayt looked into their eyes. There were two humans, a Bothan with his fur shaved clean off, and a gaunt Elomin with short horns jutting from his head. All of them had faces laced with black and red, while their eyes burned yellow with the poisonous power of the Dark Side.

He reached out with the Force and touched all their minds at once. He shared with them tiny dapples of his visions, the way he did with Wyyrlok when he was dreaming. He showed them death and destruction and pain, all part of the purifying firestorm they were about to send across the stars. It was an awesome, terrible vision. One human's knees trembled and the Elomin gasped.

Krayt broke the connections. He looked at the faces of his breathless Sith and felt their emotions through the Force, though all of them tried vainly to hide from him. He felt one human's awe and the other's fear, the Elomin's hunger and the Bothan's eagerness.

He placed himself before the human who feared and said, "Will you give your life for the One Sith?"

To his credit, the human held Krayt's eyes best he could and said in a firm voice, "Yes, Lord Krayt!"

A green lightsaber snapped to life, spun upward, and sent his head spinning. The human's body wavered on its feet, dropped to its knees, and finally fell with its shoulders on Krayt's feet.

He kicked the body aside. The others hadn't even flinched.

"There is no death," he boomed. "There is only the Dark Side! Through its strength, your chains are broken! Come with me to Zonama Sekot and break your chains forever!"

He waved an arm at the landing ramp, and the remaining three Sith marched into the belly of the shuttle. None even looked back at their comrade's corpse.

"I am sorry, my Lord," Nether said. "He was one of our finest swordsmen. I chose him for that, despite some admitted weakness in his—"

"Do not make excuses," Krayt held up a hand. "Your remaining swordsmen will be most useful, Lord Nether. Do not be ashamed."

Nether bowed gratefully. "Thank you, my Lord. I had one additional offer, my Lord, if you would hear it?"

"Speak."

"My Lord, there are still three voxyn aboard this ship. As you know, they are most adept at hunting Jedi, and I have personally trained them to be subservient to the darker energies of the Force while seeking out the light. I believe they would be most useful for this quest."

"They are fine beasts, Lord Krayt," Dician spoke up. He knew that she and that shaper, Vilath Dal, had put great time and energy into breeding a new litter of voxyn from preserved cloned tissue of the voxun queen killed by Jacen Solo before he became Caedus.

In truth, Krayt disliked the voxyn. They were strange hybrid monsters, struggling to stay alive inside bodies patched together from two different wholes. The pain of their constant dichotomy threatened to drive them mad with anger. No, he did not like the voxyn. He saw too much of himself in them.

"Your swordsmen will be sufficient," he told Nether. "Further, it would be wise of you to keep some line of defense on *Revenge*. This stalemate will not last long, and you will likely be thrown into battle."

"This vessel is more than capable of defending itself," Nether said, and Krayt knew it to be true. The ancient Rakatan ship had been a marvel, unlike any vessel flying in the galaxy today. Therefore, it was important to protect it.

"Keep the voxyn onboard, Lord Nether," he said. "They will serve *Revenge* well."

"Thank you, my Lord," Nether bowed again.

"Pick your head up," Krayt said sharply.

Nether stood straight and locked his milky white eyes with Krayt's miss-matched pair. Krayt said, "The lifeblood of One Sith is in this vessel. Protect it at all costs."

"You may count on me, my Lord."

"I know." Krayt turned for the landing ramp, where Dician and Wyyrllok waited patiently to begin.

They left Nether to stand over the headless corpse of his best swordsman and drew up the ramp. The inside of the shuttle was angular and smooth, gray and artificial. Krayt found he preferred the organic, non-uniform chambers of *Revenge* to this creation. The Rakatan vessel pulsed with Dark Side energy; this shuttle was mere durasteel plates and wiring, as empty of the Force as the Yuuzhan Vong.

The Elomin was already at the pilot's seat, the Bothan at his side. The two of them fired the repulsors and brought the shuttle to hover while the bay doors in the hangar floor swung open to reveal the stars.

The shuttle dropped into space and the doors to *Revenge* closed behind it. For coralskipper settled around the shuttle, and for a tense moment none of the five ships moved.

"They are here at our request," Wyyrllok said. "They will escort us down to the planet."

The Elomin nodded and fired the engines. The shuttle swung its pointed nose toward the vast green-and-blue planet glowing beneath them. Behind them, in the distance beyond the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, explosions and laser blasts were lighting up Zonama Sekot's outer orbit. Krayt could feel the confusion and anger, the lives winking out one by one. The exquisite agony gave him strength as he turned his attention to the world filling his cockpit.

The shuttle vibrated as it entered the atmosphere and sheets of hot flame danced across the hulls of the coralskipper. As they began to dive past thin wisps of clouds, Krayt reached out with his mind, seeking either Ben Skywalker or the Sith girl whom he had tasked to kidnap the boy.

He had only met the girl briefly, but he knew her well. She was angry and resentful, bitter at all the people who had tried to shape her over the course of her life. She was lost in a chaotic universe and did not know what to do.

Krayt would show her. He had a feeling she would be a very valuable addition to the One Sith.

His mind found that familiar touch of bitterness, snagged it. He felt the girl's physical shock as he touched her mind.

Be ready, he said. I am coming for you.

He received no message back, but then she was only a girl, promising but no master of the Force. She remained in his mind, and he allowed himself to be pulled toward her presence.

"I know where they are," he said. "Pilot, follow my command."

Their shuttle dashed through Zonama Sekot's atmosphere, first over forests and mountains half-shrouded by gray clouds. Then they had breached clouds, crossed the barrier of cliffs and beaches, and begun a long journey over the planet's largest ocean. An infinity of glimmering waves passed beneath them in a constant scroll while the midday sun shone bright through their cockpit, illuminating both their faces.

For a while, Jacen said nothing. He just closed his eyes and let the warm sunlight spill over his pale face. A tiny smile tugged at his lips, sensual and soft. She could not remember the last time she'd seen her brother smile like that.

There were a thousand things she wanted to ask, but it was hard to actually say any of them. Since Jacen's resurrection (what else could she call it?) she felt like she had been wandering through a dream. In a way, everything since they'd landed on Zonama Sekot had seemed like that. She still half-believed that her brother would wink out and she'd be left sitting in the shuttle all alone. The very idea of him emerging from the Force, body and soul joined together, defied everything she had read or heard about during her lifetime of training as a Jedi Master.

But she could not deny the feeling of their twin bond through the Force. She had forgotten it, she had *made* herself forget it, but now that it was back she felt like she had regained an arm

or a leg. The brother she had killed was sitting peacefully beside her in the sunlight, smiling, and it was at once the most incredible and terrifying thing she had ever experienced.

Of those thousand things she wanted to ask, she ended up saying, "What was it like being dead?"

He didn't respond when he heard her. He didn't open his eyes or turn his head away from the sun. His smile, however, wilted into a straight and serious line. She waited patiently for him to answer.

Eventually he said, "Frustrating."

She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but it hadn't been that. "Frustrating?" she echoed.

"Yes." His eyes opened slowly. Instead of turning to her he kept looking at the blue sky. "Because you can't *do* anything when you're dead. After I spoke with Luke, after I watched him fight Abeloth with the Dark Man, I knew I still had work to do. And I couldn't do a damned thing."

Anger crept into his voice. His jaw tightened.

"So all this time," she said, "It was all about the Dark Man you saw on the Throne of Balance?"

"I didn't even know for sure it *was* a man at first," he admitted. "He was very vivid, but I had never seen him before. I thought he might have been a metaphor for some great catastrophe. Of course, I'd never seen Allana before either- she hadn't even been *conceived* yet- but the Force told me I had to protect her, personally. Screamed to me, almost. And it told me she would bring me great pain."

When it was clear he was finished speaking, she asked, "Jacen, why didn't you tell anyone this? Why didn't you talk to me, or Uncle Luke? You said you weren't even sure if the people in your vision *were* people. You could have asked someone to help interpret your vision, or-"

"No," he snapped. "It was my vision. It was my problem to solve."

"But why?" she pressed. "Why didn't you *tell* me anything?"

"I knew if I tried to stop the Dark Man, it would bring me a lot of pain. I was trying to protect you, protect everyone from getting hurt. I thought I could take it all on myself."

"You failed," she said.

It took effort to keep bitterness from her voice. He said he had done all of it to keep his loved ones from being hurt, yet he had killed Mara, tortured Ben, turned Tahiri dark, overthrown the government, exacerbated a war that killed millions of people. No good intentions could excuse such horrors.

Jacen stared out the window and didn't respond.

She said, "You could have trusted us. You could have trusted *me*. I was your twin sister, Jacen. Why couldn't you trust me, of all people?"

Her voice broke as she spoke. She didn't know if she was sounding like a whiny, egocentric child but she had to know. The question had been eating at her soul since before Jacen's death and she had to have an answer.

"Please Jacen. Was it anything I did? Was it something I *didn't* do? When I became a Joiner, I know I shut you out. And when you made us attack that Chiss depot I was so *angry*, not just because you tricked us but because of the stuff the Joiners did to me."

The words fell out and kept tumbling. "I'm sorry, Jacen. I wasn't myself and I know I should have done something to reach out to you. I failed, Jacen. Right when you were starting to fall I could have caught you, I *know* I could have, but I *didn't*."

She stared at him, tears blurring the edges of her vision, and he kept staring at the light outside the cockpit. Eventually he said, "I've never been good with trust."

"Is that all you can say?" she snapped, suddenly angry. She had poured out fears she hadn't even told their parents or Jag, and he barely seemed to care.

"It's true though," His voice was distant, ponderous. "When Uncle Luke was starting the Jedi Council, I didn't trust him to do it right even though I was a teenager and he was the hero who'd brought the whole Order back to life. I didn't trust Anakin to lead the Myrkr mission, and after he died I didn't trust you to finish the job for him. I guess that means I've been a raging egotist the whole time."

"Don't joke," she said harshly. "Jacen, please, I have to know. Is there anything I could have done to change things?"

He turned his head to look at her, finally. When she saw his eyes, she saw the wet slips of brimming tears, just like her own. Then she understood.

“Jaina, what happened was *my* choice. *My* decision. *My* arrogance. You only did what you had to and you don't have to apologize for it. *Any* of it.”

It felt like the burden she'd been carrying for five years had just flown off her shoulders.

Turning back to the window, Jacen said, “When I first had that vision I knew the galaxy was in danger, I just didn't know *how*. So I rushed to finish up my studies, so I'd be prepared. I went to the Fallanassi, the Jensaari, and others on my list. They all taught me different ways of using the Force but I felt... impatient. I thought I was wasting my time. I was looking at everything as a potential weapon against the Dark Man and none of the things they offered seemed like they would work.”

“Until Lumiya,” Jaina said. “Until the Sith.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “That was different. But before that, I knew what I was learning wouldn't be enough. I just waiting for the darkness to come. And then we got the call. Raynar summoned all of us to Qoribu. When we went out there, I though Raynar might have become the Dark Man somehow. I thought that this *had* to be the crisis my vision warned me about.

“But it wasn't. And I felt a little... disappointed. But I didn't go back to wandering the galaxy. I knew I had to stay here and be vigilant. Plus, I had other work to do. Other people I needed to be with.”

“Ben,” she said.

“Ben was special,” he said, “But it wasn't just him.”

“Tenel Ka. And Allana.”

“And Allana,” he nodded. “When I first saw her in Tenel Ka's arms she was just a couple weeks old. She was... a baby. Pale and pudgy, this ball of fat and vague potential. But the moment I saw her I *knew* she was the woman I'd seen in my vision. And I knew I had to protect her any way I could.

“After Allana was born, the visions started again. I saw the galaxy sliding into war again and I was scared, Jaina, more scared than I was even in the Yuuzhan Vong War. We'd lost

Anakin and Chewie and so many friends, but just the *thought* of this war was even worse.”

“You had a daughter,” Jaina said. “I imagine that changes things.”

“It did,” he admitted. He glanced at her sidelong and asked, “I should have asked. Do you have children?”

She shook her head. “Married Jag, though. But I told you that, didn’t I?”

“Are you happy together? Can you *be* together, when you want?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad.” He turned his face away but she could feel his aching sadness through the Force.

Despite what he’d told her before, she felt guilt again. Her twin brother, half her life, had fallen in love and fathered a daughter with one of her best friends, and she hadn’t known until five years later, when he was already free-falling into the dark. During their time on Yavin 4, she’d nudged and prodded him to spend more time with Tenel Ka, just like he had prodded her towards Zekk. After the Yuuzhan Vong War, Jacen and Tenel Ka had seemed to drift apart while she and Zekk had been drawn closer together.

Lately, memories of her childhood romance with Zekk (holding hands under the table, smiling when they thought nobody was looking) had a certain bittersweet quality to them. When she thought of Jacen’s cracking lame jokes for Tenel Ka, his paralyzing regret after he accidentally cut off her arm, or the first time she’d kissed him after their daring escape from the Emperor’s old plague laboratory, filled her with a sadness that was physically painful.

“They’re doing okay now,” she said softly. “I saw them on Hapes, a little before coming here. Allana, she’s as beautiful as her mom. And Tenel Ka...”

“Yes?” Jacen’s voice shook.

“She seems happier than she’s ever been on Hapes.”

“She hated it there. She was always so alone.”

“Not *as* alone anymore.” A smile came unbidden to her face. “I just saw her at a wedding. Zekk’s wedding. He married one of their cousins and works in the Hapan Royal Guard now.”

"Seriously?" He looked at her with a face split between incredulity and amusement.

"Yep," Jaina smiled. "He's pretty much an uncle to Allana now. And it helps Tenel Ka a lot, having him around."

"Zekk with a Hapan woman..." Jacen shook his head.

"He always was a glutton for punishment."

"I know. He chased after *you* all those years."

She laughed freely, easily. "Oh, and Lowie has a mate too. They're going to have kits soon. And Raynar, he's getting better. He had to re-Join with the Killiks to help us find out Abeloth's secret but... Raynar's okay now. They're all okay."

The smile on his face turned sad again. "I'm glad. Really, I am. I'm sorry I missed so much."

A silence fell over the cockpit. The Sekotan shuttle absorbed all the sounds of the engines and the rushing wind outside. The ocean was rushing past beneath them, but at their altitude it seemed like they were crawling. She knew they had to race to Ben before the Sith found him, but she found she didn't want this ride to end.

She couldn't even remember the last time they had shared a conversation this intimate. They'd become estranged long before his death, and it suddenly seemed so *stupid*, all of it. It seemed, there in the cockpit, that if they had just *talked* a little more, reminded each other that they'd be there for one another in the end, then all of it could have been avoided. It was a wistful thought that could easily turn bitter, and Jaina did her best to push it aside. She'd been living with regrets for so long; she didn't need to be dwelling on them when they reached their destination. It could be fatal to her, to Ben and Jacen, to everyone.

Jacen, though, still looked peaceful, content in a way she could barely remember him being. Leaning back in his seat, watching the clear blue sky, he said, "When I first came to this planet, it reminded me so much of Yavin 4. I mean, the boras and the Massassi trees aren't *that* similar, and this place doesn't have any fantastic ruins, but it still felt like Yavin 4."

"You can see the stars at night," she said.

"Exactly. You're more... in touch with living things. Plants, animals, even other sentients. The Force, every shade of it, is

so much stronger. They say you can't go home again, but this place felt like homecoming. Sometimes I wish... I wish we could have stayed on Yavin 4 forever."

"Yavin 4 was our childhood," she said. "We couldn't stay kids forever."

"But on Yavin 4 there was so much... potential. I felt like I could go anywhere, do anything, be anyone... And after I left the Academy I spent so long looking for ways to keep growing, keep doing new things, being new Jacens. And every place I went it seemed like I always failed. Well, except for Zonama Sekot."

"Little failures are a part of growing up."

"Growing up," Jacen sighed, "I guess I've never been good with that either."

There was another question she wanted to ask, one of the big ones she'd been reticent to breach. She didn't know how much time they had until they reached the island. She didn't know if they'd get a chance afterward.

Softly, she asked, "Have you reached out to Tenel Ka and Allana?"

His shoulders stiffened. "No."

"Why not?"

"I don't think they'd welcome it. What I did to them was... hard to forgive."

"Don't you want to? They probably already felt *something* when you came back."

"Of course I *want* to," he said hoarsely. "But I don't think they'd be ready. I don't think *I'm* ready."

"I understand," she said.

She wanted to tell him that, once this was all over, they could bring Tenel Ka and Allana to Zonama Sekot. He could hold his daughter in his arms and kiss the woman he'd loved. They could bring their parents back too, and Uncle Luke, and they could all forgive the bad things they'd done to each other and dwell peacefully on this beautiful verdant planet for the rest of their lives.

The very thought was so beautiful it hurt. It was everything she'd craved for the past four years without even realizing it. She didn't dare speak it aloud for fear it might curse their

chances, but Jacen was her twin, and they were bonded through the Force, and she knew those same painfully beautiful temptations were swirling around his thoughts too.

And then, as if to break the spell, the cockpit's proximity alarm started beeping.

"Are we here?" Jacen jerked upright in the co-pilot's seat.

"Pretty close." Jaina checked her scanners. They said the island was dead ahead. She peered at the horizon-line and saw a series of specks standing out against the shimmering waves.

"Those look like islands," Jacen said. "And there's one bigger than the others."

"I see it," Jaina said. She took the controls and began to drop altitude, but she kept her eyes on the islands. Most of them looked like oversized rocks jutting out of the water, but the one in the center of the chain was a black cone rising toward the sky, with green forests draped around its base.

"That's the one," Jacen pointed toward the volcano.

"You're sure?" she asked. She didn't know if it was dormant or not but her gut told her they wouldn't be so lucky.

"Very sure," he said grimly.

"Jacen... Was this another vision?"

"I was fighting the Dark Man on a plain of dried lava."

"Okay, that sounds credible. Did you see me and Ben in this vision?"

"No. But I don't know what that means. Maybe you were there and my oversized ego blocked you two out."

She laughed at that, nervously.

"Jaina, I said I was fighting him," Jacen said, very seriously.

"With a lightsaber."

His eyes fell to the two weapons hooked to her belt. Almost all her instincts were telling her not to give him a weapon. In the year before his death, she'd drilled into herself that Jacen was a liar, Jacen couldn't be trusted, Jacen would and did turn his saber on beloved family without a qualm of conscience. One halfway-personal conversation with a walking ghost didn't change all the awful things he'd done. It didn't change Mara's corpse lying in a desolate tunnel on Kavan.

Only one thing was speaking in his favor, and that was their twin bond. One thing was half her life.

"Which one?" she asked.

"Your saber... it's the one you killed me with, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"I'll take it."

She unhooked it, held it out. He took it reverently and rolled it in his palm, as though admiring the way the slim metal cylinder gleamed in the light. Then, finally, he gripped it tightly and stuffed it into a pocket in his vest.

"Did you build the other one too?" he asked.

"No. It's from the man who convinced me to kill you."

Jacen raised an eyebrow. "A Jedi?"

"An ex-Jedi. It's complicated." she paused, then added, "He's dead now. He died defending Zonama Sekot."

"I see. I wish I could have met him."

She glanced at her brother and saw that he was serious. Before she could say anything else another proximity alarm in the cockpit went off.

"What is it?" Jacen asked. "Have we found Ben?"

Jaina looked at her scanners and felt ice drop into her gut. "That's not Ben."

She didn't have to point. They both saw them diving out of the brilliant blue sky toward the island below: one sleek, dagger-like shuttlecraft of unfamiliar design, plus four Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers.

"Jaina," her brother said, "I'm sorry for this."

"What do you-" she stopped, gasped, and looked beside her. He was still there, staring grimly at the approaching ships, but she could no longer sense him in the Force.

She shouldn't have been surprised. It was a skill he'd learned during his time in captivity among the Yuuzhan Vong, and he'd used it with increasing frequency during his trans-formation into Caedus.

"So the Dark Man can't sense me," Jacen explained. "I'm hoping we can surprise him. And I hope Ben's doing the same thing I am."

"They're going to reach the island before we do."

"All that matters is whoever finds Ben first."

"I know, but- Sithspawn!"

The shuttle continued its plunge toward the island, but all four coralskippers had broken off and were accelerating toward their shuttle.

“This thing doesn't have weapons, does it?” Jacen asked.

“Nope.” Jaina pushed the shuttle's nose toward the ocean and dove.

Jacen lurched forward and was restrained by his crash webbing. Missiles tore through the atmosphere around them. One clipped their starboard wing and the living ship screamed around them as they began to spiral into a free-fall. Jaina's hands flashed over the controls, trying to coax bursts from the port-side engine to compensate even as centrifugal force threatened to smash her brain inside her skull.

Suddenly the shuttle jerked starboard, arresting its spin but not its descent. Outside, bright ocean waves were rushing to meet them.

“Are you the same pilot I remember?” Jacen gasped.

“We're about to find out,” she said.

She gripped the control sticks with sweaty hands. They jerked against her grip like jolting animals. She pulled hard and the craft began to nose upward, hard enough to slam the back of her head against the pilot's seat. She felt the mind of the living vessel through the Force, frantic and silently screaming with pain.

Then she felt it soothe, calm.

Jacen's touch.

The ship pulled up, avoiding a direct collision with the ocean surface. The island's black peak was approaching fast.

Maybe they could do this after all.

Together.

Chapter 28

In the blink of an eye, the starlight-blur of hyperspace became the field of battle. From *Chimaera's* bridge, Fy'lyor could see it all: the glowing ion engines of Jagged Fel's fleet, the dark chain of Yuuzhan Vong vessels arrayed in an orbital arc, and finally the beautiful planet that shone with verdure and blue seas in the great nothing of space.

"Tactical, report," Fy'lyor told the lieutenant seated at the console beside her.

"Fleet's reporting in," the young man said. "Stand by for full assessment."

It took only a few seconds, but they seemed to stretch out forever. Fy'lyor glanced at the forward viewport, where Daala stood intently with gloved hands clasped behind her back. She had not given any orders yet, but Fy'lyor knew it was just a matter of time.

When the tactical holo winked to life, it showed everything Fy'lyor expected to see: the two destroyers, one interdictor, and three corvettes of Daala's fleet, the curving face of the planet, two-dozen Yuuzhan Vong capital ships of varying types, and the remaining ships in Jagged Fel's fleet: Antilles' *Starless*, Pavric's *Corusca Gem*, Vernedet's *Vindicator*, and Captain Cohl's *Lancer-class Swift*. Her relief at seeing Vernedet and Cohl alive was forgotten when she saw the other ships with Fel's fleet: *Lacentra*, *Niathal*, and most incredibly of all, *Phoenix*. Their tactical analysts had been sure that Aref'ja's flagship had been destroyed by Zonama Sekot. Apparently it had not only survived, but joined forces with Jagged Fel's fleet.

She looked out the viewport again and saw the two compact, sleek *Nebula*-class destroyers turning to face the newcomers. *Starless* and *Phoenix*, one twin dark-hulled and the other light, would make a formidable match for her *Chimaera* and *Resolve*.

She looked at the tactical holo again and noticed a chain of small unknown vessels spread out between the Vong and Trinity fleets like some kind of fragile-yet-unbreakable barrier.

Somehow, Daala's one hawk-eye must have spotted them too. She spun away from the viewport and marched over to the tactical holo.

"Captain," she said, "Why aren't they fighting?"

"I don't know, Admiral," Fy'lyor said honestly. "It's like they're being kept apart."

"*Starless* and *Phoenix* are turning to face us," the tactical lieutenant said. "The other ships are staying place, but their starfighters screens are heading in our direction."

"It makes no sense," Daala scowled. "They should be brawling each other right now."

It was the situation Daala had most expected. It was the situation she'd planned to deploy the bio-weapon in. She had outlined other possibilities to Fy'lyor, including being the first fleet to arrive, but as Daala had said wryly, a three-way battle was the most difficult scenario, and thus most likely to happen.

This stand-off was something no one had expected. Had Jagged Fel found some way to strike a truce with the Yuuzhan Vong? Was the Vong fleet intent on defending the planet at all costs? And, most importantly, what were those tiny ships that stood between the opposing fleets?

Whatever they were, she noticed they weren't budging.

"Even if the Vong come for us, they'll have to get through Fel," Daala said. "Captain Fy'lyor, give the launch order."

Fy'lyor swallowed. "All ships go, Admiral?"

"Yes, Captain. *All* of them."

"Right away, Admiral."

As Daala relayed orders to the fleet, Fy'lyor stalked over to the communications station. She leaned in over the shoulder of the lieutenant and said, "Tell the hangar bay to launch all ships, plan Alpha-Green."

"Alpha-Green, copy." The woman said.

As she relayed that order, Fy'lyor stepped back to give herself a better view of ahead. *Chimaera* and *Resolve* were inching ahead, while *Repulse* lay behind. The three *Marauder*-class corvettes were lancing forward to head off the first wave of starfighters while the destroyers launched their own squadrons. As the comm officer reported that the first TIEs were away, the space between the Trinity and Imperial destroyers lit up with slashes of laser bolts and brief, flowering explosions.

Chimaera's own TIEs, mostly cant-winged interceptors, shot out from beneath destroyer's scarred white bow. Fy'lyor's breath caught when she saw what she knew would be coming: all twelve of *Chimaera*'s TIE Defenders. Swift, heavily armed, heavily shielded, and flown by Daala's best pilots, they were still the most deadly starfighters in the Empire, almost half a century after Grant Admiral Zaarin had put them into service. Growing up, she'd entertained fantasies of being a Defender pilot after watching too many propaganda holo-movies.

These TIE Defenders were special. Each one was carrying missiles loaded with the bio-weapon.

It was, all things considered, a brilliant plan on Daala's part. TIE Defenders were the ships even veteran Alliance pilots thought twice about before tackling. By not directing fire on the Trinity ships except when necessary, they would draw little fire in return. As for the Vong, well, they would certainly kill a Defender or two, but not before some of their own ships were hit with the harpoon-missile loaded with the bio-weapon.

As for Zonama Sekot, one hit was all it would take, and the planet was a big target indeed.

The plan was a good one. It would almost certainly work. The entire Yuuzhan Vong force could be terminally infected in an hour, and after that there would be no need to fight Trinity at all. It could spare the lives of Captain Venedet and Captain Cohl. It could spare Jagged Fel.

All it would take was a little genocide.

In the painfully short, agonizingly long two-hour hyperspace flight to this location, Fy'lyor had been torn over what she should do. She was sworn to serve the citizens of the Empire, and exterminating the Yuuzhan Vong would, at first glance, protect their security.

Yet that was also what Palpatine would have said about Caamas, Tarkin about Alderaan. She'd thought again and again about Alderaan in particular. She'd ached to ask Daala her thoughts about it, and about her old lover Tarkin, but it would have given too much away.

She looked over her shoulder. Daala was staring hungrily at the tactical holo, probably keeping track of every TIE Defender as it sliced its way through Trinity's starfighter screen. As she looked back to the front viewport, she saw a flurry of light and explosions in the distance.

Taking special care that Daala wouldn't notice, Fy'lyor had inserted a pre-recorded signal into *Chimaera's* automated communications database. It was keyed to a frequency used only by the Imperial ships in Trinity Fleet and laid out Daala's intentions and plan of attack. There was no point in encrypting it. Once Vernedet saw it, he'd know what to do.

There was no room for hesitation. If she was going to give the signal, she would have to do it now, before the Defenders got through the Trinity fighter screen and began tearing through the Yuuzhan Vong fleet.

She was sworn to protect the citizens of the Empire. If the Empire was going to return to the days of Palpatine and Tarkin, that meant she'd have to protect those citizens *from* the Empire.

Fy'lyor would not let it get that far.

After making sure Daala was still riveted by the tactical holo, she went back to the communication station, leaned in close to the lieutenant, and said, "Activate signal Pellaeon 05-9. Security code 'Red.'"

The woman frowned at the unfamiliar designation, but punched it into her console anyway. Fy'lyor watched, chest tight, breathless. The light went green and she said, "Signal's away, Captain."

Fy'lyor stepped aside. She walked up to the forward viewport and stayed there until she was ready to show her face to the crew again.

Wynssa Fel had just snapped her clawcraft out of a barrel roll when the message from *Vindicator* came in over her headset:

"All ships, repeat all ships, target the TIE Defenders!" Vernet had uncharacteristic alarm in his voice. "Repeat, stop those TIE Defenders!"

Wynssa knew a thing or two about the Empire's most elite starfighters; namely, that her own clawcraft had been loosely modeled after it. She also knew that they were fast, agile, well-shielded, and equipped with projectile launchers.

She switched her comm frequency to *Vindicator's* channel and said, "Captain, this is Claw One. Do you copy?"

"I hear you, Claw One."

"Requesting sitrep on TIE Defenders. Number and position." She didn't need to know why right now, she just needed to know *what*.

"We read twelve Defenders, full squad, grouped in four shield trios. Three planet-side from you, one near *Phoenix*."

She checked her scanners. The space of Zonama Sekot's outer orbit had become a dizzying mess of Imperial, Alliance, and Chiss starfighters, but she thought she saw them marked.

"Claw One, they are not to reach the Yuuzhan Vong fleet and that are *not* to reach Zonama Sekot under *any* circumstances. Do you copy?"

"Copy, Captain. Claw One out."

Wynssa flicked her comlink to a different frequency and spun her ship around to face the planet. "Claw Group, form up. We're hunting Defenders now."

"Acknowledged, Lead."

"Claw one, this is Knave Leader," a new voice said. "You just get the same message we did?"

"Kill all TIE Defenders, top priority."

"That's right. We're engaging the ones by *Phoenix* now."

"Knaves, Claws, this is Spade Leader. We're going after the group in Orbit Zone B-9."

"Dagger Lead here. We're on the guys in B-5."

That left one set for Wynssa. "Claws, we're on B-2. Full speed ahead."

She kicked in her ion engines and was knocked back into her seat by the force of acceleration. The great living planet loomed ahead, steadily filling her viewscreen while the dark spots of the Yuuzhan Vong ships grew ominously larger. It was

sense enough that they were to stop the Defenders before they reached the Vong; even one stray shot could rouse the True Honor fleet out of its surprising slumber and cause them to wreak the havoc they were known for.

But why the insistence on stopping them from reaching Zonama Sekot?

As the glow of the Defenders' engines grew steadily and slowly larger, a sinking feeling overtook her. It was possible, however unlikely, that Daala's boarding crews had obtained samples of Alpha Red before *Celestial* was destroyed. If she *had* taken them, and understood their purpose, this was exactly the thing she would do. The Defenders were quick and nimble. They could cut through the fleet like no other ships could. They could also carry diverse payloads, including missiles that could be modified to release the bio-weapon into Zonama Sekot's atmosphere rather than detonate a payload.

She didn't know for certain. Even if she commed Vernedet or her brother, she probably wouldn't get a reply on, even on an encrypted channel.

When she'd brought the bio-weapon aboard *Celestial*, she had simply been following orders. Alpha Red had been a backup plan, in case something had gone wrong on Zonama Sekot, or in case the Yuuzhan Vong were not as accommodating as the Jedi hoped they'd be.

Well, none of those things had happened yet, though if she still had *Celestial* and her samples she might have attempted to deploy them against the renegade Yuuzhan Vong fleet. She'd sent a desperate call for help to Csilla, and as yet received no reply. It occurred to her that Daala might actually be doing them all a favor in wiping out the renegade Vong, but the old hawk-bat was surely going to go after Zonama Sekot as well.

She wondered whether Sekot's life was a price worth paying to save her brother and her surviving crew.

They were catching up with the Defenders fast, and both squads were getting dangerously close to the cordon of Sekotan ships.

Time to make a choice.

In the end, it was surprisingly easy.

At least Jag would be pleased.

She brought up her targeting computer and acquired lock at the lead Defender. It would be in range in seconds.

"Acquire targets," she told her pilots. "Stand by to fire. Three. Two. One. Weapons free."

Wynssa squeezed the trigger. Spears of green plasma shot forward in a wave. The Defenders broke formation to evade the initial blasts, but she'd been expecting that. She barked out target designations to her pilots and kicked in pursuit for the lead Defender.

The enemy fighter pulled upward in a nimble corkscrew maneuver, and she pulled her fighter upward in pursuit, lacing more green laser blasts ahead of the Defender. Energy sparked across its defensive shields but didn't break them. As Wynssa got closer, the Defender dipped its nose down and plunged into a steep dive, this time angling for the line of Sekotan ships.

Wynssa checked her scanners. One Defender was down and another was breaking fast for the Sekotan line. The other two were tied up in dogfights with her Claws.

When she got close enough to her Defender, she began pummeling its shields with laser blasts. The vessel was getting close to a Sekotan shuttle, almost within firing range. Wynssa didn't know when it would use Alpha Red and didn't care to find out. She lit up its shields with another volley, which it tried to evade with a sharp portside role. She nudged her craft in the same direction and fired again, catching the Defender but again not breaking its shields.

"Claw One, this is Three," a voice said. "Fire starboard volley, on my mark."

She didn't think or question. She just trusted her pilot.

"Mark."

The laser blasts nearly clipped the Defender in its starboard solar panel, but it banked into a sharp roll once again. Before it could come out, a second set of laser blasts speared down from above, punching through its shields and tearing apart its port solar panel. As Claw Two's fighter stabbed down, then pulled up for another pass, Wynssa targeted the spinning, crippled Defender with a final volley of last blasts. The craft burst into a fireball that continued to tumble through empty space until the vacuum quenched its flames.

"Excellent shot, Three," Wynssa said.

After a second, Three replied, "Thank you, Leader." He probably wasn't used to the compliments.

Wynssa's feeling of elation was cut short when she glanced at her scanners. One more Defender was down, and another was tied up in a dogfight against four Clawcraft at once and wouldn't last long.

The final one had already broken past the line of Sekotan ships and was heading straight for the Yuuzhan Vong fleet.

"Three, on my wing," Wynssa said.

"Copy, Leader."

The Defender was fast approaching the Vong ships. It didn't seem to be angling toward a specific vessel, and Wynssa's guess was that it was heading straight for its primary target, Zonama Sekot itself. However, the Vong fleet already had coralskippers launched, and a whole swarm of them were heading right for the Defender.

It was entirely possible they would kill it before she did, then turn right around and kill her. Likely, in fact.

She plunged in anyway.

She came down at the Defender from an angle. By the time she got within firing range it would be fighting or dodging its way through a squadron of coralskippers.

She told Three, "Defender only. Evade the skips and don't fire."

"Copy, Leader."

It was a mad order, and likely to get them both killed, but she didn't want to break the fragile truce between Trinity and True Honor, especially when her brother was starting a full-on star destroyer brawl with Daala's fleet.

The Defender began firing at the nearest skips. The agile Yuuzhan Vong starfighters danced around its blasts or swallowed them with their dovin basals. The Defender weaved its way through the wave of Vong skips and kept moving. Most of the skips wheeled around for a chase, but a few kept going outboard toward Wynssa.

She saw the light of their cannons and rolled to the right, Three following. The skips shot past them and began to wheel around once again.

The Defender had done an admirable job of evading its coralskippers, but a few remained on its tail. As Wynssa drew closer, the Defender surprised her and the Vong by juking to the right and cutting its engines hard. The skips shot ahead, and before they could angle their dovin basals aft, the Defender pounded them with a volley of green laser blasts. They tore through the coralskippers and shredded yorik coral, leaving long trails of debris drifting through space.

The Defender angled itself upward again, putting it right on course for Zonama Sekot.

Wynssa was right behind it, cannons blazing, blasting through the debris in front of her. Three did the same, and the Defender was caught off-guard by the sudden attack. Its pilots tried to pull away when another squad of coralskippers charged in from above. Molten Vong missiles and green energy danced across its shields, intermingling for one brief moment, before the energy field collapsed and the Defender crumpled into a ball of mangled, fiery debris.

The skips charged right through the wreckage, gobbling up the flame and twisted metal with their dovin basals.

They couldn't take the last rounds from the clawcraft.

Wynssa's breath caught in her chest as the two lead coralskippers tore apart under her fire. The others angled angrily toward her.

Then Three said, "Leader, we have two skips behind—"

His voice burst into static and she saw the flash of his fighter's explosion.

Wynssa didn't swear, didn't breathe, didn't even think. She pulled her joystick tight against her chest and pulled into a steep climb that eased into a loop. She pointed her nose to the Sekotan ships and kicked her engines to top speed.

A half-dozen coralskippers were in fast pursuit, spitting missiles that barely missed her weaving starfighter.

Her ship was fast, but she couldn't outrun them all. She glanced at her scanners and saw no other TIE Defenders within the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. That meant they had probably all been destroyed, and Alpha Red with them. So she'd died to save a world. She could be proud of that. She hoped Jag would be.

"Pull up on my mark, Leader," someone said. "Mark!"

She didn't think she did. She angled her fighter up just as seven clawcraft resolved out of the starfield in a blaze of green laser blasts. Some of the coralskipper behind her peeled away; others were torn apart by the sudden volley.

Wynssa aimed for the Sekotan line again as her squadron formed up on her wing.

"Coralskipper retreating," one of her pilots confirmed.

"Did we stop the Defenders? All twelve?" Wynssa asked.

"All Defenders destroyed," he said.

She felt relief, then dread.

Pretty soon, Trinity Fleet was going to be smashed between Daala's hammer and the Yuuzhan Vong anvil.

"Why did you call our fighters back?" Voran Lah spun on his commander. "They attacked without provocation! They killed our pilots!"

It hadn't looked that way to Vilath Dal. To him, it had looked like those fighters were dead-set on killing one enemy ship, and a few coralskipper had been caught in the crossfire. But then, he was just a shaper, not a warrior, so his opinion didn't account for much. Only Maal Lah's did.

The warmaster stood in front of the tactical display, calmly observing the swarm of colored insects as they played out the drama between the two infidel fleets. When the second one had arrived, Vilath Dal had wondered if they would not, in fact, ally with each other against True Honor. Instead they had quickly turned on each other, infidel killing infidel.

It was no wonder who so many Yuuzhan Vong despised them still.

Maal Lah had been content to let the infidels kill each other, which had seemed perfectly reasonable to Vilath Dal, but not to Voran Lah and, by the look of it, many other warriors on the bridge. Especially the young ones.

Now that blood had been drawn, even some of the older warriors looked expectant. Maal Lah, however, kept observing the tactical screen calmly.

Voran Lah was less than pleased.

"We must avenge our brothers," he insisted. "We cannot allow this affront to go unpunished!"

The warmaster finally deigned to look at his second. "The infidels keep slaying each other. We shall wipe out the remainders when they are done. It is the safest course of action."

"Safe?" Voran Lah spat. "When does a Yuuzhan Vong warrior care about *safe*? You have gone soft!"

Maal Lah scowled. "Know your place, second. I am in command here. This is a battle we are set to win. There is no point in wasting lives."

Vilath Dal glanced anxiously around the bridge. Half of the crew was watching the altercation. Most of them weren't even bothering to hide it. He could see the anger on a lot of the warrior's faces, and little sympathy for their seemingly-recalcitrant commander.

"You value your *life* more than *honor*," Voran Lah took one step, two steps closer.

Maal Lah finally angled his body to face his second. An amphistaff uncurled from his arm and stiffened in his hand. Voran Lah stood with his legs splayed wide, feet angled outward, hands hovering wide over his hips.

"You will respect your superior, Voran Lah," the warmaster said. "If you don't, *you* are the one without honor."

"You," said Voran Lah, "Are no one's superior, old man."

It happened so fast Vilath Dal barely registered it. Voran Lah lunged forward. Maal Lah whipped his amphistaff in a broad horizontal slice. Voran Lah seemingly lost half his height mid-stride, then he was right in front of his Warmaster, face-to-face and eye-to-eye.

A short, wide couffe extended from his right sleeve and dug into Maal Lah's chest, right beneath the ribcage.

The warmaster dropped his amphistaff and tried to grab Voran Lah by the throat. A second couffe appeared in the younger warrior's left sleeve, and he thrust it upward into the place where Maal Lah's neck met his jaw.

The commander made one pathetic gurgling sound. His hands fell limp at his side. Voran Lah withdrew his blades and stepped back. Maal Lah seemed to waver for a moment, dead on his feet, the toppled like a giant tree.

Vilath Dal stared, speechless, thoughtless.

Voran Lah licked the blood off his blades as he stared at his warmaster's body. Then the young warrior turned to his bridge and said, "We hide no longer! Now, we attack!"

Some warriors were too stunned to respond. Some looked scared or reluctant. Most, though, raised their arms and shouted, "*Do'ro'ik Vong pratte! Do'roik Vong pratte!*"

Voran Lah turned to Vilath Dal. The one motion seemed to take forever, its moment arrested by the shaper's overwhelming horror and dread.

Voran Lah licked a bit of Maal Lah's blood from his teeth and said, "The shaper is of no more use to us. Take him out and execute him."

"You can't!" Vilath Dal spluttered. "The Sith--"

"The Sith are worse than the *Jeedai*! We have given them enough already." Voran Lah turned to his bridge. "Tell *Purifying Flame* and *Jaws of Victory* to open fire on the Sith abomination. All other ships, prepare to attack the infidels."

"But the Sekotan ships--"

"Destroy them," Voran Lah commander, and pointed to Vilath Dal. "No more protests from you, shaper. Guards! Take him from my sight. Cast him into the void, so he may die painfully and without honor."

Vilath Dal struggled in vain as two sets of arms clamped on his shoulders and ragged him off the bridge. The portal slid shut behind them, muffling the bloodthirsty cries of the warriors but not muting them, not at all.

Chapter 29

When they'd first washed up on that island, Ben had felt a sense of relief. Partially it was just because he'd survived, and that he hadn't been taken to whichever Sith Vestara called masters now. More than that, it was because he and Vestara finally had time to talk.

There was no point in trying to fight, physically or verbally. They both knew that on this mysterious island, potentially thousands of kilometers from the nearest sentient, they would have to depend on one another to survive whatever challenges they faced before someone, Sith or otherwise, came for them.

Furthermore, Vestara had been too tired to fight. She'd also been too tired to erect barriers around her emotions. Without even touching the Force, he could sense her indecision and her feelings of loneliness.

He knew she had done terrible things, but was willing to forgive those, because he knew there was potential for good in her too. It had been hard to admit that at first, after the sharp personal pain she'd given him, but his mother had helped him look beyond that. Now that they were alone together, he was determined to do what he could to pull her away from the Sith. He didn't expect to make her into a Jedi- he'd given up on that- but he wanted to lead her to some better path than the one she was on now.

That had been the plan, anyway.

When the impossible had happened, he hadn't known what to think. He hadn't even been sure it was real. What he sensed in the Force wasn't like what he'd felt when his mother re-

appeared. Mara's presence had been striking and authentic, but it had felt half-hidden by death's vale.

There was nothing hidden about Jacen Solo's Force presence. It was distant, but he felt it clearly: his cousin was alive. Somehow, Zonama Sekot had returned him to life, body and soul.

He couldn't tell *which* Jacen it had plucked from death. That distant presence did not feel like the Darth Caedus who had brutally tortured him while Kashyyyk burned. It was, however, unmistakably the Jacen he had known in life: determined, tired, and a little sad.

Beyond that, he knew nothing at all. What had been an opportunity one moment before suddenly seemed a cage. A part of him dreaded the thought of seeing Jacen again; another part knew he needed to.

He didn't tell this to Vestara. He didn't know how to explain it to himself. When she asked what had upset him he said that he felt his sister was in trouble, which was probably true enough.

Vestara had seemed a little pleased by that news, actually. Jaina *had* cut off her arm, so it was a little excusable. Vestara then insisted they set out across the island on another trek. They needed more food (preferably some meat, if the island had any game besides those rainbow-tailed birds) and even more than that they needed fresh water.

The former proved elusive, but they found the latter after a few hours of trekking. A shallow but swift stream wind its way downhill through the bottom of a crevasse. Vestara had gone down first, refusing any help from Ben. Then he'd gone down too. The water from the stream tasted better than anything he'd ever known, and when he's sated his thirst he partially unzipped his jumpsuit and began dousing washing the caked sweat and dirt off himself. Vestara, squatting a meter upstream, watched him guardedly for a few minutes, did the same.

Afterward they continued to explore the island, but Ben had been unable to escape Jacen's shadow. His cousin's presence was lurking there at the back of his mind, and even that tiny remnant brought back a surge of memories all fighting to the surface: Jacen in the cave on Kavan looking at Mara's body; Jacen sneering at Ben as he tortured him; Jacen taking him on

raids with Lon Shevu and the GAG; Jacen fighting alongside him on Centerpoint; Jacen treating him like an equal when no one else would.

Vestara could clearly tell he was troubled. Whether she thought it was because of Jaina, or whether she intimated a deeper truth, she wouldn't say. Whatever the case, the talks he'd planned on having with her didn't happen.

And, after another day of wandering, it was Vestara's turn for a shock. They were walking downhill through the forest when it happened. Vestara simply froze. She stared straight ahead and didn't blink, didn't even breath. Something was touching her mind, and Ben could feel reverberations of some dark and powerful presence in the Force.

Then the presence was gone. Vestara gasped and crumpled forward, hand on her knee and face toward the ground.

"Yes, what is it?" he said, though he didn't have to ask.

"It's *him*." She licked her lips and looked up at Ben. "Darth Krayt."

"Krayt's coming here? Personally?"

"Oh yes," she said. "He wants you bad."

He watched her, trying to figure her intentions. She was guarding both her expressions and her presence in the Force. He wanted to think that this time they'd spent together, even if it was short and mostly tired and dirty, had meant something to her. He wasn't sure *what* it meant exactly, but he hoped it meant something. He hoped for both their sakes that Vestara had not surrendered to being Sith and only Sith for the rest of her life.

"You don't have to take me to him," Ben offered. "We can run. Or fight."

"We can't fight him, Ben," she said with honest fear in her voice.

He wanted to ask if she was going to march him right into the dragon's claws. He didn't. He was too afraid to hear the answer.

Vestara gave him one anyway. She plucked his mother's lightsaber from her belt and said, "Get going, Jedi. March."

"Oh, Ves... You don't have to do this. You don't have to be afraid of him."

"Yes I do, Ben," she sneered. "You're about to find out why. Now *march!*"

The lightsaber snapped to life. He looked in her eyes and saw no anger or hatred, just animal fear. In some ways, it felt worse than if she'd betrayed him out of darker emotions.

He turned and began walking down the slope. His mother's lightsaber hummed right behind his shoulder blades the whole way down.

It did not take them long to get to the island's edge. Instead of a black-sand beach or a plain of cooled lava, they found themselves in a clearing on the edge of a cliff. Jagged chunks of black-stone, half-covered by vegetation, tumbled some twenty meters into an ocean foamy with crashing waves.

They heard the sound of something roaring through the sky and looked up.

Ben was surprised to spot multiple ships. To the north he saw a dark, dagger-like shuttle plunging into the atmosphere, flanked by four rock-like shapes that might have been Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers. To the south there was something more small and nimble, with thin outstretched wings.

He could sense both shuttles in the Force. The one to the north was a beacon of dark, predatory energy, and he understood some of Vestara's fear. To the south, he felt the familiar presence of his cousin Jaina.

Of Jacen, he felt nothing at all. He wasn't sure what to make of that. When he reached out he discovered that Jacen was gone completely from his mind. Yet Jacen *had* been alive just hours before, he was certain of that.

And if his cousin had died a second time, he was sure he would have felt that just as he'd felt Jacen's death at the hands of his sister.

Then again, Jacen had an old trick to hide himself in the Force. It was a trick he'd learned from Vergere and taught to his cousin, and Ben had a feeling it might prove useful very soon.

They watched, wordless and helpless, as the coralskippers broke away from the Sith shuttle and fired their molten missiles at Jaina's Sekotan ship. Because it was Jaina's ship, it twirled and pirouetted through the air like the most elegant dancer. Yet in the end it was unarmed, and out-numbered four-

to-one. One missile tore off half its starboard wing and sent it into a spin. Ben gasped as it tumbled toward the ocean, trailing a spiral of black smoke.

Then it fired one engine, tore itself out of its spin, and plunged in a straight line toward the water. The coralskippers fired more missiles that shot past it and splashed white geysers in the ocean surface. When it got close to the main island, Jaina's shuttle pulled up sharply. As it did, another Yuuzhan Vong missile slammed into its aft, causing one of its engines to burst into flames.

Just for a moment, as the smoking shuttle streaked overhead, he felt a sober, determined presence touch his mind: *Stay alive, Ben.*

Then Jacen was gone again.

The shuttle disappeared over the canopy of the trees behind them. Ben watched desperately for some other sign, but saw nothing. Then he heard the muffled sounds of something very heavy tearing through part of the forest and smashing into the side of the mountain.

He reached out with the Force, desperate for some sign of either cousin. He felt nothing from Jacen, but from Jaina he could still feel a determined presence: dazed and a little dimmed, but still strong.

He grabbed Vestara's shoulder. "We have to go back. We have to find them!"

"Them?" She jerked it free and held the lightsaber up between them. "Who are *they*?"

"Jaina," he said. "Jaina's on that shuttle, I'm sure of it."

"Too bad," Vestara grunted.

"Yes, listen, please, it's not *just* Jaina. It's... it's..."

"Who?" she snarled.

Before he could say the impossible, hot air rushed the cliff and a shadow fell over them. Ben looked up and saw the Sith shuttle firing its repulsors and extending its landing gear.

He went to run, but Vestara grabbed him by the arm, spun him around, and gave him a Force-assisted shove that sent him sprawling into the rocks and grass. His knocked his head on a black stone and struggled to fight the pain away.

As he struggled to his feet, Darth Krayt's shuttle set down behind him. He turned and rose on shaky feet while Vestara stood at his side, lightsaber at his throat.

"You don't have to do this, Ves," he said. "You don't want to. I can't feel that."

"What I want *never* mattered," she said bitterly. "It's not going to start now. For what it's worth... I'm sorry, Ben."

The shuttle's landing ramp lowered like a monster opening its jaws. The being that walked out first looked like nothing Ben had ever seen before. His massive body was covered in rough armor almost like a Yuuzhan Vong warrior. His face was half-hidden by a horned mask that revealed a squared human jaw laced with black tattoos and two eyes, one Sith-gold and the other ocean-blue. He held an old silver lightsaber in each hand and he stepped toward Ben without faltering.

Behind him was a trail of acolytes. A tall Chagrian with red-and-black tattoos covering his face took the lead. Behind him were three more with the same facial markings: a human, an Elomin, and a Bothan looking freakish without his fur. Finally, at the rear, was a tanned-skin humanoid woman dressed not in black robes or Yuuzhan Vong armor, but a utilitarian vest and jumpsuit not unlike Ben's own.

"Lady Khai," the man in the lead rumbled, "You have done well."

"Thank you, Lord Krayt," she said. "You may do with Skywalker's son as you wish."

Krayt stepped up close to Ben. There was only his mother's humming lightsaber that stood between him and the dragon. He was stunned by how *massive* the man was. It was impossible to tell where the human ended and the fearsome spiked armor began. Through the Force, it felt like a whirling maelstrom. His thoughts seemed to skirt through Ben's, filling him with flashing images of fire and plague and devastation and death.

He tried not to be afraid, and failed.

Then Krayt said something he never expected: "You have something of your grandfather in you."

Ben stared. "You *knew* Anakin Skywalker?"

"Yes. He was my friend." Krayt's tone betrayed no emotion, and somehow that made him more menacing than ever. "I had

the chance to kill him once. If I had, it could have all been different.”

The lightsaber in Krayt's right hand sprung to life. A long red blade hung at his side. Vestara withdrew Mara's, giving him free space to strike.

“Now,” he said, “To correct a mistake.”

“Hey, wait,” Ben said, “You wanted me alive, right? Right?”

“The Skywalkers have haunted my life for a very long time,” said Krayt. Slowly, he lifted his sabers.

No! someone screamed in his head.

Not someone. *Something* he'd given up for dead.

Everyone must have heard it, because everyone turned to look beyond the cliff's edge. The ocean churned as it rose from the waters. Its ancient spherical hull was battered and torn. The web-like sail on its starboard side had been torn off completely. Cracks ran though its forward viewport, but Ship still gave the appearance of a massive eyeball, gazing scornfully down at the tiny beings on the cliff.

Run! Ship shouted in Ben's mind. *Your destiny is together!*

Vestara gasped. It was speaking to her too.

As for Krayt and the other Sith, they were frozen in utter shock.

Ship dove.

Vestara had already grabbed Ben's hand to pull him away. They were nearly to the treeline when Ship slammed into Krayt's shuttle. The explosion knocked them off their feet and sent them tumbling face-first into the brush. Ben pulled his face out of the dirt and looked behind him to see a massive fireball gushing black smoke into the sky.

In his heart, he felt a stunning *lack*.

After all this time, after everything it had done, Ship had sacrificed itself to save him. Him and Vestara.

Because it thought their destiny, great or awful, was together.

And maybe because, in its own twisted way, Ship had been fond of them both.

Vestara was looking back at the fireball. The pain of loss was obvious in her face.

He got to his feet and dragged Vestara up by her arm. “Come on, Ves! We have to go! We have to find Jaina now!”

"Did it kill him?" Vestara shouted.

No. Though he couldn't see anything in the blaze, Ben could feel Krayt's presence still.

"Come on, Ves! We have to go! Now!"

He moved deeper into the forest and tugged her arm. She hesitated for a moment, but only a moment. Then she plunged in after him. They ran as fast as they could and dared not look back.

Pain, fire, and dreaming:

He stands with both feet on the outer line of the practice circle. Standing across from him: Anakin Skywalker. Anakin's padawan braid dangles over his shoulder as he hunches forward, lightsaber pointed directly at his opponent. His face own remains hidden by the brown wrapping, goggles, and grill-like mouthpiece of a Tusken warrior. He hopes it will recall some childhood fear in his opponent, but instead he seems something more like anger in Anakin's eyes.

From the corner of the room, Master Kenobi calls, "Begin!"

Anakin lunges forward. He sidesteps and flips up his father's blade with his left hand, knocking Anakin's aside. His right hand clasps the lightsaber he made on his own, and he makes a feinting stab for Anakin's exposed side. The young man pivots, hops away, and brings his lightsaber up to a defensive position.

He holds his ground while Anakin walks in a careful circle around him, probing for weaknesses. Anakin radiates determination through the Force, and behind that, anger. He doesn't know what he did to make Anakin so angry but something has him on edge today. Indeed, he barely knows the young man, though he has been curious about him for years, not just because of the 'Chosen One' rumors, but be-cause of their shared homeworld.

Maybe it really is the Tusken mask.

Kenobi senses it too. He frowns from the sidelines but doesn't say anything, not yet.

Anakin lunges again, this time ducking low and swinging out in a broad arc. He jumps over the blue flash of the padawan's blade, then propels himself over Anakin's head in an aerial roll. He lands on his feet and turns to swing but Anakin has

already reverse direction and is attacking. He blocks one blow, then another with his father's lightsaber. Then he goes on the offensive with his own, batting Anakin back with one blow, two, three, until he is at the edge of the practice circle.

It was foolish of Anakin to volunteer to spar one lightsaber against two. But Anakin has never shied away from a challenge, and even now, with his back to the edge, he radiates the same angry determination as before.

Anakin lunges forward again. He swipes out with his father's blade and holds Anakin's up and to the side. Anakin still grips it with both hands even as he takes his own blade and places it next to his opponent's neck. The saber's blue glow lights the underside of Anakin's jaw and reflects in his eyes.

"It's over, Anakin," he says.

Over Anakin's shoulder he can see Kenobi, trying to keep grave concern off his normally stoic face.

Then Anakin drops.

His knees fold up, his torso arcs back, his head snaps as far as it can go. His lightsaber wheels down and to the side, and his father's blade spins out above it. His own saber whirls through empty air.

Anakin's knees hit the chamber floor with the painful clunk of bone on tile, and his saber keeps spinning.

Spinning back around.

He frantically sidesteps, only to feel sharp pain shoot through his left leg as Anakin's saber skims across his calf.

"Anakin, enough!" Kenobi bellows.

He drops to his knees as Anakin rises. He drops both lightsabers and clutches the black scorched line on his leg. Thin wisps of smoke escape his clenched fingers. He is very glad for the Tusken mask. He does not want them to see the pain rending his face.

"I'm sorry, Master," Anakin says to Kenobi. "I didn't intend to hurt Jedi Hett, but there was no other way out of his attack."

"It's all right," he tells them both, and it's true. He doesn't hold it against Anakin for sparring rough; he actually admires him for it, especially compared to the other padawans, who insist on playing safe even though a war's just broken out. The Sep war droids and Dooku's dark minions aren't going to be

gentle, and neither should the Jedi. Besides, he was too overconfident. He left himself open for Anakin's attacks and got what he deserved.

"I apologize for my student, Jedi Hett," Kenobi says. "I'll call a medical droid right away."

"No," He snaps. "I'll walk to the clinic myself."

"Can you do that?" Anakin asks. The concern is clear in his voice. The anger in his Force aura, while subdued, is still there.

"I'm fine," he insists, and as if to show proof, he rises on trembling legs. In truth, the pain shooting up his left calf is exquisite. It makes his head swim and his vision fill with white. But he rises, and he remains standing, and that is the important thing.

"I'll escort you," Anakin offers, "In case you should fall."

"I will not fall." It is only pain. He has to master his pain.

"Then I'll walk by your side."

"All right," he acquiesces. "Let's go."

Kenobi, thankfully, leaves them to walk slowly down the hall. To Anakin's credit, he does not apologize for what happened. The two Tatooine boys walk in silence, passing a cluster of child trainees led by Master Shaak Tii. They are younger than either he or Anakin had been when they first set foot inside these halls.

As they get close to the clinic, he ventures, "Is it the war?"

"What?" Anakin blinks.

"Is it the war that makes you angry? It makes me angry."

Anakin considers for a moment. "No."

"Then what is it?"

"I lost someone," Anakin admits. "Someone close to me."

"I'm sorry," he says honestly. Unlike Jedi raised in the sheltering walls of the Temple, he understands attachment and he understands loss.

Anakin looks away. "I have to put that behind me now. There's nothing I could have done to save her."

He can tell Anakin does not believe his own words. He knows that there was nothing he could have done to save his own father. That hasn't stopped him from blaming himself for over a decade.

"Are you afraid?" he asks.

Anakin blinks, scowls, then lies, "Of course not."

He doesn't say anything as Anakin walks ahead faster, singalling an end to the conversation. While the Clone Wars, with all their attenuate death and suffering, make him angry, they do not make him afraid. He'll never admit this to the Masters, but a part of him is excited about the war. He feels he will finally have an opportunity to prove himself, to right wrongs, to bring order. To do what Jedi were meant to do.

And he senses that by the end, the Jedi will have been their wildest imaginings, both as an Order and as individuals.

Sometimes he thinks it's his imagination, and sometimes he thinks the Force itself is talking to him, telling him that the conflagration will change no one more than two orphan boys from Tatooine.

It tells him their destinies are the same. It does not tell him they are bound together; rather that they will find the same end through different paths.

Whatever that end may be.

Pain, fire, destiny:

He found himself on the edge of a cliff-side strewn with burning wreckage. He summoned all the strength in his body and rolled himself wholly onto the dirt and grass. He rose and scoured the scene. He saw Darth Wyyrlok rising to his feet and felt a rush of relief, mixed with slight trepidation. He saw the Bothan rising slowly and patting the flames out of his scorched black robe. The Elomin was kneeling over something, and as he stepped closer he saw that it was the corpse of the human, torso ripped open by flaming shrapnel.

He reached out with the Force and felt for Dician.

His physician responded from the opposite edge of the debris field, but her presence was weak. He walked through the field of flame, twisted metal, and scorched-black earth until he found her.

She was lying face-up, staring at a sky that shone perfect blue beyond twirling ribbons of black smoke. She had a chunk of black shrapnel lodged in her torso, just below the rib cage. Dark blood was oozing out of it, while another trail ran down the side of her mouth.

Even as he bent next to her, she kept staring up at the smoke and the sky.

"I am sorry," he said honestly. Though not powerful enough to be a Sith, she had been a more brave and more essential member of Krayt's union than almost any Lord.

He touched her mind in the Force and felt the pain, so much pain that it blocked out her thoughts in a white blaze of agony. He could sense that keen mind working somewhere beneath the white, trying to fight its way to the surface, maybe to tell him something.

"My Lord, our quarry is getting away," Wyyrlok said from behind him.

"I know," Krayt said, and reached out to place one hand on Dician's forehead.

Through the pain she sensed his touch, and her open jaws twitched as though attempting speech, but the only thing that escaped them was more dark blood.

"You've done well," he said. "You will be missed."

Then he gripped her head tight and gave it one sharp twist, neatly severing her spinal cord. Her bloody chest shuddered once, then went still.

He rose to his feet. Three Sith Lords in tattered black robes stood before him, patiently awaiting his orders.

He clasped his father's lightsaber in one hand, his own in the other. "We go into the jungle, and we find Skywalker's grandson."

"And the girl?" Wyyrlok asked.

"If the girl has betrayed us," Krayt said, "Then we will keep her alive to watch as we destroy the boy she loves. *Then* we will kill her."

Wyyrlok nodded with a thin, pleased smile on his tattooed face. Wyyrlok the first, Wyyrlok, the loyal, Wyyrlok the traitor-to-be. Perhaps. Right now, he sensed no duplicity, only a desire to fulfill the brutal justice of the Sith.

As it should be.

Chapter 30

Myri Antilles had never thought of herself as a pilot. She'd never thought of herself as much of anything exactly, which might have been a problem, but that was another issue entirely. The point was, while she had the quick eye and fast reflexes of a pilot (chalk it up to genetics), she didn't have the natural talent for flying that her father or sister did. Sometimes people observed that where Syal took after their father, Myri took after her mother (which usually produced eye-rolling on Iella's part), and while that wasn't totally true either it was closer to the mark. She felt comfortable with her feet on the ground, or barring that, the deck of a ship.

She certainly didn't feel comfortable weaving her matte-black StealthX fighter through a swam of coralskipper as their volcanic missiles spewed fire and destruction all around. Rather, as she wrestled with her control stick, she used every breath in her to utter a torrent-of-consciousness of profanity that would have made the worst Corellian pirate blush.

When she cleared the pack of skips she checked with her astromech droid to make sure no vital systems had been damaged. Then she flicked her comlink back on and said, "Lead, this is Skate. You still with me?"

"Copy that, Skate," Piggy's mechanical voice soothed her ears. "Follow my lead. Reforming with others."

Myri decelerated, letting Wraith Leader's StealthX overtake hers. Then she fired her engines again and followed. With their

curved hulls and dark finish, StealthX fighters were difficult to see with the naked eye as well as with scanners, and she didn't notice Turman, Thaymes, and Wran until their fighters were right next to hers.

"All clear here, lead," Turman reported. "Those skips are coming in fast."

"Too fast," Wran growled.

"Cut chatter," Voort ordered. "Stand by. Orders from *Starless*."

For a second, her comlink went dead. Myri looked out either side of her cockpit and surveyed the awful scene. Rather than face the incoming wave of Yuuzhan Vong fighters and capital ships, what was left of Trinity Fleet had thrown itself into a pitched battle with Daala's forces. *Starless* and *Phoenix* were in a messy broadside brawl with *Chimaera* and *Resolve*, while *Vindicator* attacked *Repulse* and the three Marauder corvettes generally played merry hell with the lancer frigate *Swift*. Starfighters wove tangled thrust-trails between the giant capital ships, and flares lit up and vanished every second. Good people died with every flash of light and Myri felt sick at her own helplessness to stop the slaughter.

Corusca Gem, *Lacentra*, and *Niathal* were on rear guard, which meant facing the brunt of the oncoming Yuuzhan Vong attacks. Their coralskippers were already swarming around the Mon Cal cruisers and carrier like wasps, and a pair of heavy cruisers were moving in to attack.

"Look alive, people," Voort returned to his comlink. "We're going after one of those cruisers."

"What?" Myri yelped. Thankfully, her speaker wasn't on.

"Lead, please explain," Wran said, clearly tense.

"Nexu and Pike Squads are taking it to the port-side cruiser. We're flying with them."

"Heavy hitters," Myri muttered. Pike Squad was a host of B-wings assault fighters from *Starless*, while Nexu Squad was made up on old K-wing heavy bombers from *Gem*.

"Lead, are we covering their backs?" Thaymes asked.

"Negative, Talker. Torch Squad's doing that. We're dropping bombs too. *Starless* thinks we can slip in while they're aiming for the big boys."

It was, from a certain view, logical. The skips and gunners on the Vong ships would be going after the heavy bombers and attack craft, and they'd probably miss the black X-wings entirely.

From another point of view, trying to take out a huge heavy battleship with five X-wings was karking mad.

Her father had taken out capital ships using only snubfighters before. Of course, her father had helped take out two entire *Death Stars* using snubs. And Myri was not her father, nor Luke Skywalker.

But orders were orders. Piggy's StealthX leapt forward, and so did hers.

The big Yuuzhan Vong ship loomed ahead. It seemed like a jagged, sinister counterpart to the smooth organic Mon Cal ships. The Wraiths pushed in a little ahead of the Nexus and a little behind the Pikes. The XJ X-wings of Torch Squadron hung back, keeping skippers off the backs of the Nexus' lumbering K-wings.

"Skate, on me," Piggy said. "Everyone else, follow Shooter."

"Copy," Wran said. "Taking lead position."

The Vong ship began to fire its defensive batteries. Big missiles like flaming rocks shot past the B-wings.

"Target weapon emplacements," said Piggy. "Dive on my mark. One. Two. Mark!"

Myri made sure her speaker was off, pitched her ship forward, and started swearing up a storm as space lit up all around her.

She followed Piggy's X-wing as it bobbed and fell toward the surface of the Vong ship. Missiles fired past them at the bigger ships. Piggy and Myri flew low over the rock-like surface of the cruiser, firing off laser blasts at any missile launcher or dovin basal emplacement they could find. They scored a few hits and knocked two launchers out of commission before they shot out behind the cruiser and wheeled around for another pass.

As she turned around, she saw the other three StealthX fighters flying to meet them. Meanwhile, the B- and K-wings dropped payload after payload onto the cruiser. Ribbons of red exhaust from their missiles fell toward the cruiser's surface, but

less than half exploded on the surface; the others were swallowed up by the dovin basal singularities that protected the vessel.

"We're going under. Get ready to target the aft dovin basals with torps," Piggy said. "Same teams."

"Copy, Lead, We're on it," said Wran.

Myri followed Voort again. She loaded two hot missiles in the tube and aimed for the undersides of the dovin basals used to propel the cruiser. On Voort's mark, she let two fly. Piggy popped off another pair, then turned his nose down so he ran beneath the cruiser's belly. Myri did the same, and ducked her fighter down right as a fireball burst out of the cruiser's aft.

"Whooo!" Wran shouted over the comm. "*That* got 'em!"

"Wait!" Turman shouted. "We lost Talker!"

Myri checked her scanners. "I got no EV."

"I think he was... swallowed. By a dovin basal."

Myri's mouth felt dry. All thrill of victory was gone in a second. First Trey, now Thaymes had joined the honor rolls of dead Wraiths along with Bhindi Drayson, Jesmin Ackbar, Ton Phannan, and many more.

"Incoming," Wran reported. "Coralskippers, three o'clock."

Myri swore. Swore for Thaymes, for Trey, mostly for herself as a hail of missile fire raced in from her starboard side. She and Piggy dove down, away from the cruiser's fiery belly. She checked her scanners and saw more skips in pursuit. Wran and Turman were tangling with even more enemy fighters.

It was amazing how fast battles could turn. Thirty seconds ago, she'd surged with elation. Now she was about to die.

Suddenly a hail of green laser blasts slanted through space. Explosions flared behind her and she looked to see the shredded debris of the coralskippers on her tail.

"We're clear!" Wran's voice sounded in her ear. "Thanks for the help!"

"Not a problem," said a cool female voice. "My brother would, ah, bust my butt if I didn't protect yours."

Myri laughed in relief and flicked her comlink back on. "Yeah, thanks, Claw Lead."

"Understood," Wynssa Fel said curtly as her clawcraft settled between Myri and Voort's X-wings.

There were more flares of light from above, and Myri looked overhead to see explosions chewing through more of the cruiser's hull. As the Wraiths and Claws pulled back, she got a better view as the B- and K-wings tore a massive gash through the nose of the Yuuzhan Vong cruiser. With its engines down and dovin basals overwhelmed, even the X-wings from Torch Squadron were feeling their torpedoes.

"Join the fun?" Myri suggested.

"Gladly," Piggy said. "All ships ahead. Let's take it out for Thaymes."

"Roger that," Wran said. "Going in, weapons hot."

"Affirmative," Wyn Fel said.

The X-wings and clawcraft dove toward the dying cruiser, Myri waited until she was close enough to get a good shot at one of the remaining dovin basal emplacements and popped off two more torps. She pulled away just after she got to see them impact and tear through the yorik coral hull.

As they pulled out, so did the B- and K-wings. The bombers were turning to attack at the remaining Yuuzhan Vong heavy cruiser, which was currently exchanging fire with both *Lacentra* and *Niathal*. Its dovin basals were already being overwhelmed and explosions began to gnaw at its surface.

Myri felt another surge of exhilaration. Then she looked back toward the planet and saw some twenty more Yuuzhan Vong vessels eager for a fight. Another wave of coral-skippers and bulkier attack craft were already nearing firing range.

This was a long, long way from over.

When the Yuuzhan Vong fleet finally attacked, it didn't pay any heed to the long, fragile line of Sekotan ships strung out between two angry fleets. Of the coralskippers that led the charge, most whipped past the shuttles without even firing. Only a few bothered to launch missiles, most of which were easily avoided by the nimble organic vessels, though one was hit in the wing and spiraled into the passing coralskipper, taking its killer with it.

"All ships, fall back," Danni Quee broadcasted urgently to all Sekotan ships. "I repeat, all ships fall back! Seek shelter on the nearest capital ship you can get to."

"I knew this would happen," Scut grumbled as he kicked the ship's repulsors and tipped it out of the path of a swarm of coralskippers.

Tahiri didn't disagree. She had, frankly, been expecting this too. The Sekotan ships would now be in a mad scramble to reach *Corusca Gem*, *Starless*, *Phoenix*, or whoever else had room for them. It would be a mess and some would surely die. All their brave line had succeeded in doing was delay the inevitable battle, not that she'd ever really expected to accomplish anything more.

Maybe it would mean something in the end. Maybe it wouldn't. All the other Sekotan ships were fleeing toward Trinity Fleet, but they were different. They had a special mission.

"Scut, take us in," Tahiri said.

Her pilot blew out a long breath. "Copy that."

They had already pinpointed the location of the Sith vessel, and Scut fired their engines to draw them nearer. Tahiri glanced at the scanners, hoping they would provide a more detailed account of whatever kind of ship they'd be facing. It was, in one sense, totally mad to charge a mysterious vessel full of Sith in a single unarmed craft.

Tahiri just hoped trust in the Force would get the job done.

As they drew closer, Tahiri could make it out with her naked eye: one relatively small vessel, disc-shaped, with a hull that was at once glossy and slightly irregular, like the surface of an insect's exoskeleton. She felt something in the Force, something ancient and pulsing, almost like the ancient, Sith meditation sphere Ben had uncovered on Ziost all those years ago but decidedly different.

Her surprise gave way to acceptance. Of course they'd use some kind of organic vessel. The Yuuzhan Vong would never have accepted them otherwise.

"What is that?" Kodra Val asked as the shaper leaned over Tahiri's shoulder. "It looks... alive. But hardly Sekotan, or Yuuzhan Vong."

"I'm not sure," Tahiri admitted. In the back of her mind she remembered reports from the Jedi Jaden Korr, who said he'd found an ancient organic Rakatan vessel somewhere in the

Unknown Regions. That vessel had been destroyed, but this might have been something from the same set.

Before she could ponder what mysteries the galaxy might be hiding, the Yuuzhan Vong frigate nearest the Sith vessel opened fire. Molten missiles lanced out, not at Tahiri's own ship but at the Sith. The other frigate nearby began firing as well. The Sith ship moved immediately, as nimble as a starfighter. Despite having no visible means of propulsion, it danced around both volleys and hurled itself toward the closest frigate. Energy crackled out of unseen weapons and scorched the frigate's surface. It kept firing, and another volley clipped the Sith ship on the edge, but it quickly recovered and continued to overwhelm the larger vessel.

As the frigate broke apart, the Sith ship spun on the other Yuuzhan Vong cruiser and charged.

"You want us to board *that*?" Kodra Val gaped.

"I've never seen anything like it," Scut shook his head.

Tahiri looked behind her. Everyone in the cockpit was staring in shock and awe as the Sith vessel took out a second ship far larger than itself. Narith's eyes were wide with fear, while the old warrior Kerem Charn's scarified face was stretched in horror. Two of the younger Ganner sect warrior, Volan Kraal and Zokal Buhl, looked almost excited.

"Incredible," said Zokal Buhl. "It will be an honor to take that ship down."

"An honor?" Scut spat.

"Wait, look!" Tahiri said.

Even as the second Yuuzhan Vong ship smoldered and began to crack apart, two more were arriving, as well as a swarm of coralskippers. The Sith vessel did not hesitate to attack the closest cruiser. Its energy weapon again lashed out, nearly breaking off the cruiser's port fins with a single attack. Yet just after scoring a hit, a squadron of coralskippers dropped into a dive-bomb, pummeling the Sith ship with missiles. The Sith's dark disc was hit, wavered, stopped firing. Then energy stretched out to the skips, but too late. The coralskippers at the head of the formation were disintegrated but the others charged through and slammed into the Sith vessel like living missiles, one after another.

"Did it work?" Narith asked. "Is it dead?"

Tahiri's gut, or maybe the Force, told her that ship wouldn't be killed by the Yuuzhan Vong. That would be too easy. This was only going to end with the blaze of a lightsaber and the hiss of amphistaffs.

Yet the Sith vessel was clearly damaged. The two Yuuzhan Vong cruisers began pounding it again, and it did not fire back.

"It's down," Scut said hopefully. "They've got it."

Then another burst of energy spread out. The damaged cruiser took the brunt of it. Its yorik coral hull began to crack and break. Oxygen, people, and equipment was flushed into the void. The second one kept pounding the Sith vessel even as its kin died.

When the Sith vessel moved again, it gave no warning. It simply shot like a bullet right into the bottom of Yuuzhan Vong ship. It disappeared as explosions and breaches tore through the ship's hull. Kodra Val gasped. A couple warriors cheered.

Then the Sith ship appeared, breaking through the top of the hull, trailing fire and smoke and debris. This time, instead of dancing over to its next target, the vessel seemed the waver. Tahiri felt something through the Force like an animal cry of pain.

Then the ship began to fall, slowly at first, then more quickly. It was being pulled in by Zonama Sekot's gravity well.

"It's falling to the planet," she said. "Keep on it!"

"What?" Scut frowned. "The ship's dead, right? It'll burn up in the atmosphere."

"A scientist always verifies," Kodra Val said.

"Okay, okay," he grunted. "Better be sure."

He fired the engines again. The Sekotan ship passed through a field strewn with the wrecked, scorched remains of four Yuuzhan Vong vessels and several squadrons of coralskippers. That meant those ships couldn't hurt her friends on the planet or in the fleet, and while Tahiri felt glad of that, she was hardly relieved.

The Sith were her target from the start, and even in a crippled dying ship, they weren't dead yet.

Scut pitched their shuttle toward the planet, following the Sith vessel's tumbling black disc as it hurtled toward Zonama

Sekot. As it hit the upper atmosphere its shiny surface turned red-hot with flames.

"It's burning up," Scut said hopefully.

"Stay on it," Tahiri said.

They plunged in the falling ship's fiery wake. The Sekotan vessel's shields would protect it from the heat of re-entry, but Tahiri wasn't sure if the Sith ship even *had* energy shields, or if its hull was made up of some ultra-durable compound known only to its builders. Soon they'd cleared the upper atmosphere and began tearing through the cloud layer. White vapor, illuminated by stark sunlight, blinded them in flashes, but Scut still trailed the Sith vessel as it streaked like a comet across the blue sky.

When they burst through the last layer of clouds, Tahiri saw nothing but a vast ocean twinkling in the sun. Scut pulled the shuttle up to avoid plunging into the water, but the Sith vessel had no such control. Still trailing flame, it slammed into the ocean's surface, kicking up a geyser of white foam hundreds of meters high. Scut leveled the shuttle and banked around the crash site.

"Do you see anything?" he asked. "I don't see anything."

Tahiri, and everyone else, craned forward to get a better look. White-capped ripples spread across the ocean, disrupting the natural flow of waves. At the center of the disruption was nothing. They continued to circle the crash site for a minute and nothing happened. The impact ripples were leveled by the timeless, all-consuming ocean.

"It's gone," Narith said with relief.

But it wasn't. Tahiri could sense the vessel in her mind, crying out in dying pain. She would have felt better about that if she couldn't sense, with increasingly clarity, the presence of many Dark Side-using beings around it.

Then the black disc breached the ocean surface. Foamy salt water spilled off its surface. It bobbed in the waves like a bird.

"Is it... dead?" Narith ventured, hope already draining from his voice.

Tahiri shook her head. "It's dying, though. We have to finish it off."

"How?" Scut looked at her.

"This thing can land on water. Put us down right next to the Sith ship." Tahiri unbuckled her crash webbing and got to her feet. She unhooked the lightsaber from her belt and turned to the warriors.

"This is what you came for. Are you ready?"

Zokal Buhl held out an arm. The amphstaff wound around it extended its fanged face toward Tahiri. "We would be honored to fight with you, Riina Kwaad."

"It's an honor to fight with you," she said truthfully and extended a hand. The amphstaff leaped from Zokal Buhl to her and coiled around her forearm so she could wrap her hand around it midsection.

She looked at the lightsaber, and the amphstaff, and felt more whole than she had in a long, long time.

"Okay," she said, "Let's go."

Vilath Dal generally considered wallowing in self-pity to be the habit of an inferior mind. A being should be in control of himself at any given time, constantly aware of the world around him and adjusting to act on new data.

That being said, as they marched him toward the airlock, he couldn't help but feel like a fool. He'd joined True Honor because he was bored to madness in Harrar's staid utopia on Zonama Sekot. He needed challenge and struggle, and he needed new opportunities to expand himself as a scientist and as a sentient being. In Maal Lah, a rare warrior he knew and respected, he saw a leader who might create an environment where the Yuuzhan Vong could flourish as they were meant to, spread out across the stars instead of huddling pathetic and defeated on Zonama Sekot.

Somehow, in his quest for excitement he had forgotten the stupidity, arrogance, and proclivity to mindless violence that marked the warrior caste. As punishment for his arrogance, they intended to take his life in the most agonizing way possible.

But because Vilath Dal was an aware, thinking, superior being (most of the time, anyway) he stuffed his melancholy back where it belonged, right next to fear and panic in a part of his brain he usually kept tightly sealed.

"Please, you must reconsider," he told the warriors dragging him down the hall, "I can still be useful to True Honor! Maal Lah meant nothing to me. I can serve Warmaster Voran Lah in countless ways!"

Linking the word 'warmaster' with 'Voran Lah' was enough to put bile in his throat, but he stuffed that down too and adopted a trembling tone. "Please, please don't do this! I am a loyal Yuuzhan Vong like yourself! I will do anything to serve!"

"Quit talking, coward," grunted the brute on his left.

They took him past the portals that connected *Honor Regained* to the coralskippers and shuttles that clung to her hull. They were probably planning to toss him into an umbilical with no ship attached and let him get sucked out into the vacuum, which was no pleasant thought. He was pleased to note that a few of them still had vessels berthed.

"No, stop! You can't do this!" He writhed against their grip with renewed energy, not that it did him any good against the hulking warriors.

"You are a pathetic coward," the one of his right grumbled. "You deserve to be torn apart by yansacks, but the Warmaster says you should float in space, and that is what you will do."

They hauled him up to a portal with no ship attached. The one with on his right reached out to open it. Vilath Dal coiled his arm up and dug the nails of his hand into the inside of the warrior's elbow, inserting poison directly into his blood.

The warrior let out an un-warlike yelp. His partner asked, "What is it? What did he do?"

The warrior's grip on Vilath Dal's arm slackened. His jaw worked but no sound came out. He let go of the shaper and fell hard to the deck.

"Traitor!" the other warrior snarled. He let go of Vilath Dal and went for his amphistaff. Before he could bring the weapon to bear, Vilath Dal stepped right in front of him and drove the same fingernails right into the warrior's neck.

Right where Voran Lah had made the killing blow to his commander. Vilath Dal felt there was something a little poetic about that.

The light went out of the warrior's eyes and he fell next to his friend.

Vilath Dal sighed. He didn't like killing his own- such was an infidel specialty- but he didn't like dying in vacuum either. He picked up the dead warrior's amphistaff and let it curl around his waist like a belt. Then he went looking for a good ship. He wanted to be far, far away when Voran Lah inevitably got everyone aboard killed.

There was no place for him with True Honor, and he doubted there was a place for him on Zonama Sekot.

That left one very narrow possibility. Very narrow, and potentially very... exciting.

In a way, it was kind of funny. Miranda Fardreamer had gone off to fight the Yuuzhan Vong, ended up fighting with Empire against the Alliance, then *joined* the Alliance to fight the Empire.

And now, after all that run-around, she was finally getting a chance to fight the Vong.

Working the comm station on *Phoenix's* bridge meant she was not quite in the thick of fighting, but it certainly felt hectic enough. Admiral Kre'fey was bounding back and forth across the deck with impressive vigor for an old Bothan, taking news and giving orders rapid-fire. It had been crazy enough when they were slugging it out with Daala's ships. Now that the Vong had joined the fight, a fairly standard naval engagement had turned into a messy, chaotic brawl.

From her spot at the comm station, Miranda had a decent look out the forward viewports. The situation was, frankly, astonishing. *Chimaera* and *Starless* were still slugging it out, but *Resolve* and *Repulse* had broken off and were heading toward the inner-orbit battle zone where three Trinity cruisers were trying to hold off an onslaught of Yuuzhan Vong ships. Explosions burst and died every second against the blue-and-green backdrop of Zonama Sekot. Countless starfighters and assault craft wove twirling trails around each other and filled space with flashing laser blasts.

"Admiral," she heard someone say, "*Niathal* is under heavy fire. Don't know how much more she can take."

"Tell her to fall back," said Kre'fey. "We'll help cover."

Miranda's chest tightened as *Phoenix* lurched closer to the inner battle zone. In the area immediately outside *Phoenix*, coralskippers had joined the already-messy tangle of TIEs, clawcraft, Alliance fighters, and the occasional Sekotan ship beating hasty retreat.

"Admiral," said the tactical officer, "We've got incoming Vong ships on intercept course."

"Let me see, it."

Kre'fey went right over to the tactical holo. Miranda couldn't make sense of its blazing lights, not from halfway across the bridge, so she turned to watch the front viewport again. She thought she saw several ovoid ships heading toward them. They were definitely larger than the coralskippers and seemed more sluggish.

"Assault shuttles," she whispered to herself.

"All ships, target those assault shuttles!" Kre'fey ordered. "Tell all hangars to fire up tractors. I want those shuttles kept away from both launch bays."

"Copy that," Miranda said, and flicked her console to the proper internal channel.

After a second, someone picked up the other end. "This is Main Hangar Deck Control."

"Bridge here," Miranda said. "We've got incoming Vong boarding parties. The Admiral says to fire up the tractors and keep them out."

"Copy. Putting shields on double-layer."

Miranda was just about to switch off the connection when he added, "Hold it! Wait, no, we're-"

A burst of static roared in her ear. Miranda quickly flicked off the channel and turned to the Frozian comm lieutenant.

"Sir," she said, "Communications with the main hangar are down!"

The lieutenant's pale fur bristled. "Did you try the secondary?"

"Secondary? No, I didn't-"

Suddenly the entire deck shook. For a second fear stabbed into her and she expected half the deck to be torn open like it had last battle. The shaking stopped a moment later, but alarms began wailing on the bridge.

“Admiral!” someone said frantically, “We’re reporting hull breaches on decks F-7 and E-19.”

“The main hangar deck is down too!” Miranda shouted.

For a second Kre’fey froze. His vigor disappeared and he looked like the tired old Bothan he was.

Then his lips curled up to reveal white fangs and he said, “Tell all troops and guards to go to red alert. Seal off all breached decks and all routes in and out of the hangar bay. Get troops there immediately.”

“All of them, Admiral?” Someone asked.

Miranda knew that it might be possible to keep the Vong from boarding through the hull breaches, but there were too many routes in and out of the hangar area. If the Vong had established a beachhead there, it would be almost impossible to contain them.

Kre’fey hesitated for a second, and Miranda realized he was thinking about the ones guarding the True Victory hold-outs.

“*All* of them,” Kre’fey said. “Arm the prisoners too. If they want to fight the Vong, let them have a chance.”

A few True Victory die-hards, cheered. The rest just looked scared.

Miranda’s hand slid down to the hard bulge in the pocket of her right trouser leg. Before the battle began, she’d retrieved her confiscated things, including Ben Skywalker’s lightsaber. She heard they couldn’t actually cut through Yuuzhan Vong armor, and she obviously knew nothing about how to properly fight with one. She hoped, very very hard, that she wouldn’t have to use it to defend herself.

If that need *did* come, well, the ship would have been taken, and she’d be as good as dead anyway.

Still, she wanted to take as many with her as possible. If she was going to die on the deck of a ship like her mother and father, she might as well die like they hadn’t: looking into the face of the enemy.

It wasn’t what she wanted, but it might be all she got.

Chapter 31

When their shuttle tumbled out of the sky, trailing black smoke from failing engines, it had taken Jaina's miraculous flying abilities to keep them from plunging into the ocean or exploding against the black-rock slope of the island's volcano. When they belly-flopped onto the black rock, it still tore through the hull of the shuttle and ripped off the remaining wing. Only their crash webbing kept both of them from getting their brains splashed across the inside of the viewport. The shuttle itself had no such protection; its systems began to die while Jacen & Jaina struggled to escape their seats and find footing on the sharply-angled deck.

Jacen felt the living ship die, and that surprised him in more ways than one. Between his conversation with Jaina, the firefight with the coralskippers, and the frantic crash-landing, he'd forgotten that the Sekotan ship was, in fact, a living being with some limited sense of self.

He was more surprised at how clearly he felt the confusion, pain, and anguish of the living ship. A long time ago, he'd been very good with animals. On Yavin 4 he'd collected all manner of strange and dangerous creatures from the jungle and brought them into his personal menagerie at the Great Temple. The only thing that had kept them all from running amok was his own strong empathic bonds with other living things. Just as now, he'd been able to feel their confusion and pain and

anguish, and he'd been able to touch their minds with the Force and soothe them, even bargain with and convince them.

Somewhere along the way, he'd shut down that part of himself, just like he'd shut down many others in his single-minded pursuit of what he'd thought, in reckless arrogance and conceit, to be his destiny.

Now, without his even willing it, that empathic bond had opened again. The ship's pain racked his body as if it were his own. When he recovered from the shock, he touched its mind back and tried to send it calming thoughts. He projected warmth and stillness, enveloping like salty ocean water. Slowly these sensations drowned out those of the dying ship's pain. His body trembled with echoes of the ship's agony but he kept sending calming thoughts until he felt the ship's consciousness wink out.

Then everything was very quiet, and very still.

"I felt that," Jaina said softly.

"It was the least I could do," he said.

She looked around the cockpit. Sunlight slanted through the viewport and fell on consoles that all seemed dead.

"There's a portable generator in the cargo hold," she said, sensing his thoughts. "We can hook it up to the comm systems long enough to send a distress signal. I think."

"Good," he said. "But I think we have other things to deal with first."

"Can you sense any of them? Ben or the Sith?"

Jacen closed his eyes and stretched out. He was still hiding his own Force presence as Vergere had taught him, but it did not affect his ability to sense others. He felt a great blazing fire and angry determination and knew it was the Dark Man, edging closer and closer. He sensed another presence, closer still. It felt very scared, confused, and lonely. He knew it wasn't Ben.

"Vestara," Jaina said grimly.

"Who is that?"

"A Sith girl. She and Ben were... involved."

By Jacen's count, Ben was still a teenager, barely, and that probably meant their *involvement* had been one of normal adolescent confusion, extrapolated tenfold by their differing

allegiance in the Force. Ben being Ben, he'd probably thought he could bring her to the light and failed. He didn't envy Ben the experience, even compared to his own painful love affair.

"I don't sense Ben anywhere," Jaina frowned. "But I would have felt him die. I know it."

"He's hiding himself, just like I taught him."

He saw Jaina's frown deepen; he knew his withdrawal was reminding her of those awful times when he'd cut off their twin bond as his fall to the dark accelerated.

Well, she was going to have to trust him. He hoped she was better at trust than he was himself.

"She's coming this way," Jaina said.

"Do you think Ben is with her? If he was with the Sith he wouldn't be hiding in the Force."

"Are you *sure*?"

"No," he admitted. "But either way, we'd better get out and greet her."

"She won't be happy to see me," Jaina said. "Last time we met, I cut off her arm."

With that she turned and walked down the hall, leaving Jacen to stare at her back as she moved down the canted corridor with one arm constantly braced against the wall.

He knew Jaina could be very cold. When the pain got to be too much, her answer was to just shut off her emotions and shut out other people. Whether that was better or worse than using and savoring pain, as Vergere had taught him, he didn't know any more. But the callous, matter-of-fact way she'd just spoken reminded him of the way she'd behaved after Anakin's death.

It had been four years. She'd gotten married and become a Master. But in killing her twin brother, she'd had to fall back on the cold and ruthless part of her nature lest she hurt all the time. For the first time he realized just how badly his sister was damaged, and how of it came down to him. He yearned to do something to help her, but as he'd just said, they had more pressing concerns.

As he followed her down the crooked hallway, he promised himself that they could set all this to rights later. Time would heal wounds, or at least help them scar over. He hoped, prayed,

that he would survive this, and that Zonama Sekot would be able to keep his spirit bonded with this created body. He wanted to see his parents again, and Tenel Ka and his daughter. He wanted to see Zekk and Lowie and Raynar. He even wanted to see Luke, though he knew such a meeting would be incredibly painful for them both.

But pain was a part of being alive, the Yuuzhan Vong had been right about that. He wanted to savor that living as long as he possible could. Even if he was stuck on Zonama Sekot, he could still find ways to live out a successful, fulfilling life. Indeed, if he *had* to be trapped on one planet, this would be the one. He and Sekot might even work together and find a way to touch the Unifying Force one more, as he had during that brilliant pinnacle of his life fifteen years ago.

But hope was a distraction. He purged distractions from his mind and followed Jaina out the hatch and onto the back of their broken ship.

Sunlight blazed down through humid air that smelled of equal parts brimstone and distant salt water. It was a strange, tangy concoction and he savored it in his nose and lungs, just like he savored the hot light on his face. The shuttle had crashed near the bottom of the black volcano's slope. The plain of dried lava continued its gradual fall toward the gleaming blue-white line of the ocean. The igneous rock spread far to his right, curving around the side of the volcano, but to his left he saw green grass and the edge of a forest and short young bora trees.

"They're coming," Jaina said beside him.

She stabbed a finger at two figures scrambling across the black slope out of the forest. One appeared to be a woman with long, tangled hair waving in the breeze. She only had one arm, but it pumped furiously as she walked across the black rock. The other was a man, lean but no longer lanky. His red hair was cropped short and his face was to be darkened by ash.

Jacen's eyes locked with Ben's across the distance. He was hidden from Ben in the Force and Ben was hidden from him, and at that distance he could not make out the young man's expression. Ben didn't pause in hesitation. He and Vestara kept walking, swift and purposeful, toward the crashed ship.

When they got within ten meters they both stopped to peer up at Jacen and Jaina, still perched atop the dead shuttle's back. Ben was squinting against the sun, hiding his eyes, and his mouth was a tight line revealing no hint of whatever he might be feeling. When Ben had talked to Jacen through the Lake of Apparitions, Ben had said that he'd forgiven Jacen. He had seemed to mean it at the time, but now he was staring at the living man- more or less- instead of just the wavering shade of his mother's killer.

"Hello, Ben. I'm glad you're all right," he said. It was all he could think of.

Ben just nodded. His head shifted slightly toward Jaina. "Vestara's with me. Darth Krayt's wounded, but he's catching up."

"Darth Krayt?" Jacen asked. "You mean the Dark Man, wearing Yuuzhan Vong armor?"

"That's him," Ben nodded. "Hiding in the Force means I'm harder to track, but he can still follow Ves."

"How many?" asked Jaina.

"He had three more Sith, plus his scientist, Dician," Vestara spoke up. The girl looked confused and frightened. "We don't know how many escaped the explosion."

"What explosion?" Jaina asked.

"My.... The ship I've been using crashed into the Sith shuttle," Vestara said. "It... sacrificed itself for me."

"She's talking about the Sith mediation sphere," Ben tilted his head to Jacen. "The one I found on Ziost, and you gave to Lumiya and Alema Rar."

His voice hinted at bitterness, but his tone was alert and business-like. He clearly wasn't surprised to see Jacen alive, and had probably been planning for this meeting in his head.

In four years Ben seemed to have grown into a full-fledged adult; a little wiry yet, a little smooth in the face, but his bearing was no longer that of an apprentice desperate to please his master, or of a sulky teenager who resented his father's shadow. Ben seemed like his own man now, and Jacen couldn't describe how glad he was to see that.

Vestara, however, peered at Jacen and frowned. "Who *are* you?"

"That's my cousin Jacen," Ben said evenly.

"Your cousin?" she looked at Jacen suspiciously. "They told me you were dead."

"I got better," Jacen said.

"They told me you were a dead *Sith*."

"Like I said, I got better. What about *you*, Vestara? Are you still Sith?"

She looked taken aback that the dead man knew her name. She glanced at Ben as if seeking support. To his credit, Ben's face did not soften in a show of sympathy. He surely still had feelings for this young woman, but he wasn't letting them show and he wasn't letting his feelings control him. Jaina must have noticed too; he felt her relief through the Force, too subtle for the others to notice, but nonetheless clear through their twin bond.

When it was clear she was getting no more help from Ben, Vestara looked back at Jacen and said, "I don't know what I am. I really don't. But Lord Krayt... He terrifies me."

"Good," Jacen said. "He's terrified me for *years*."

"You... *know* Darth Krayt?"

Jacen shook his head. "I didn't even know his name until just now. At least, not his Sith name. But everything I've done, good and bad... it was all to stop Krayt." He shifted his gaze to Ben. "And we're going to stop this. Right here. Right now. Together."

"Then what?" Ben asked.

Jacen blinked. "Excuse me?"

"What... happens to you after we kill Krayt?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Sekot was able to resurrect my body because we had a bond when I was alive, and because I was restless. I *wanted* to live again because I knew I still had work to do."

"And when *that* work's done, then what?" Ben was pressing hard, asking questions like an investigator. It seemed he'd kept some parts of his GAG training.

"Like I said, I don't know. I can't leave Zonama Sekot, so I'm not going to go around trying to conquer the galaxy again. I don't want to anyway. It was a mistake. I thought... I thought I had to do it all alone. I told myself it was to protect the rest of

you, but it wasn't. I needed to think I was the only one who could save the galaxy." He looked at Jaina. "I know sorry doesn't cover it, but I *am* sorry."

Ben stared at his boots and the black rock. "I told you before I forgive you. That I let go of all that hate."

"And now?" Jacen spread out his hands. "I won't hold it against you, no matter what you say."

"Now... I don't know. I really don't. But hate isn't something I can afford with Krayt breathing down my neck, is it?"

"No, it's not." Jacen said. He would sit down, talk things out with Ben when all this was over. Right now, though, he turned his attention to Vestara. "What about you? Will you help us fight Krayt?"

Vestara seemed to pale at the thought. One look at the shuttle must have told her there was no escape. Once again she looked to Ben. This time, the young man reached out. Instead of taking her hand, or tenderly touching her face, he simply put a palm on her shoulder and squeezed it.

"All right," she swallowed. "I'll fight. I'll help protect Ben. Are you happy?"

"Happy enough," Jacen said. "Thank you."

"I'm no Jedi," Vestara blurted, though the thought hadn't crossed Jacen's mind. "I'm no hero. I just... don't want Ben to die. He deserves better than being twisted apart or torn open or whatever Darth Krayt has planned for him."

"Is Krayt after Ben specifically?" Jaina asked.

Vestara nodded. "I'm not sure why. He said... a Skywalker stalks his dreams."

Jacen felt a spike of alarm. "What do you mean, stalks his dreams?"

"I don't know. But Krayt has... visions of the future."

"Great," Jaina grunted. "We all know where those lead."

"He said he's seen a man. Not Ben, but some other Skywalker, a blonde one. He knows he's a Skywalker, I don't know how, but he does, or at least *thinks* he does."

"Did he tell you about the man? Anything specific?"

"He said... Sometimes the man is kneeling before him. Other times they're fighting. And he says he keeps on seeing this man floating alone in space, in a vac suit."

In his shock, Jacen couldn't find anything to say. When he'd seen his first vision of Krayt, the Force had screamed to him that the red-haired woman at the Dark Man's side was intrinsically connected to his fate, and that she had to be protected. This had proven very true, but in his obsession with Allana he had totally neglected to consider the angry blonde-haired man on the other side of the throne. If this man was haunting Krayt's visions too, then he had to be someone from the future. A Skywalker, likely Ben's own descendant.

He stared at his cousin with new understanding. He tried to recall the features of the blond man in his visions, and sought some reflection of those in his cousin's maturing face. He thought, just maybe, he saw some of it: in the eyebrows, the mouth, the nose, but not the eyes. Ben did not have the angry eyes of that man, or their grandfather.

His monomaniac devotion to protecting Allana had blinded him to something of great importance. Again.

"What is it?" Jaina asked. Even without being able to sense him in the Force, she knew he'd been stricken with some awful realization.

"Oh Ben," he rasped. "I am sorry. I am so, so sorry."

Ben frowned. "What do you mean? Do you know this man?"

"No. And I doubt I ever will. But we have to protect the future, Ben, and that means protecting *you*."

"Glad we have that cleared up," Vestara interjected. "The Sith are almost here. We've got four people and three lightsabers. No idea who Krayt has with him, but he likes to double-wield. What's the plan?"

Jacen unhooked Jaina's lightsaber from his belt. He tossed it to Ben, who caught it in one hand. He looked it over, then held it out to Vestara.

"Exchange?" he asked simply.

Vestara looked at it, then nodded. She handed Ben back her lightsaber. No, not her own. Mara's lightsaber. The sight of it set a cold weight in Jacen's gut.

Ben took Mara's weapon in his hands. He ran fingers over the smooth metal casing and a light smile touched his face, like his mother had just stroked him across the cheek.

Maybe she had.

"What are you going to do?" Jaina asked her brother.

"Krayt can't feel me, or at least I don't think he can. He hasn't reached out to me in the Force, I don't think."

"So you want to surprise him? How?"

He scanned the black plain and rocky slope. He spotted an outcropping not far from the wrecked shuttle. Its position would shield him from view of anyone approaching from the forest, as Ben and Vestara had.

"I'll hide," he said. "See if I can take anybody out and claim his saber."

"Okay," Jaina unhooked the blaster pistol from her belt and held it out, stock-first. Jacen took it and gripped it firmly in his right hand. He was no gunslinger like his father, but some weapon was better than none.

"I'm going to go hide behind that outcropping," he called down to Ben and Vestara. "You two try to keep them occupied while I attack from the flank."

"Occupied how?" Vestara frowned. She was clearly not enthusiastic about this plan's chance for success.

"He's after me," Ben said. "I can try to talk to him."

"You don't *talk* to a man like Krayt."

"He can't sense me through the Force. He's got to be curious about that. I can pretend to barter for your lives."

"Just get them close enough for me to even the odds," Jacen said.

"I will," Ben said firmly. "Are you sure you don't need a lightsaber?"

"You'll need weapons more than I will," Jacen said. "Besides, they won't be expecting an attack from a dead man."

"Unless Krayt's seen *you* in his visions," Vestara said.

He hadn't thought of that one. "We'll just hope he hasn't."

Jacen hopped of the back of the shuttle and, with a Force-assisted cushioning, landed on the black rock in front of Ben. For a moment the two stared at each other. From this level, Jacen could see how much Ben had grown, both physically and emotionally. Just like Jacen at that age, he'd seen too much and lost too much to ever be young or innocent, but his scars had healed over to make him stronger than ever before. He was going to be a fine Jedi, straight and true like his father. His

scars would never end up tearing him open in the end, as Jacen's had, and he envied his cousin very much.

He wanted to tell Ben that, and so much more. But this wasn't the time or the place. Instead he held out his hand.

He saw Vestara tense; Ben must have told her more than a few things about him already, all of them doubtless true.

Ben reached out and shook firmly. Then Jacen turned away from them all and marched up to the outcropping. He placed himself so that he was hidden from the view of the approaching Sith. He cleared his thoughts, focusing on the blaster in his hands and the dark presence looming ever closer.

Patiently, he awaited the arrival of the man who had been the unseen center of his life since his first vision in the Maw. More than Lumiya, Vergere, Luke, Jaina, Tenel Ka, Allana, even that mysterious future Skywalker, Darth Krayt was the man who had dominated his destiny and pulled him downward into darkness and death.

He very much wanted to return the favor.

It was like dream made reality, or reality dissolved to dream. Past and present, then and now, seemed to lose all meaning as Darth Krayt walked across the plain of dried lava toward the crashed Sekotan shuttle. Three figures stood on its back, lightsabers blazing violet, blue, and green. Behind him, three Sith Lords followed, their own weapons humming red.

He held Sharad Hett's lightsaber in his right hand, A'Sharad's in his left.

He stands in the practice circle as Kenobi looks on, waiting for Anakin to strike.

The waiting Jedi did not move as he approached. Their ship was clearly damaged beyond repair, and they had no choice but make a stand. Ben Skywalker was there, standing in the middle. To his left, the one-armed traitor Vestara Khai. To his right, a small woman whose long brown hair blew like a curtain in salty breeze.

She charges at him and her blue blade clashes with Sharad Hett's. He lifts his other hand to block an attack from her brother.

Three, only three. He could sense Vestara and the woman, Jaina Solo, blazing defiantly in the Force. Skywalker, however, did not register at all.

Skywalker shouts in rage and charges, lightsaber blazing above the curls of his blond head.

He had heard that this living planet could manifest itself in the Force and appear before a being's very eyes. His first thought was that this was not the real Ben Skywalker, but some illusion cast up by Sekot to confound him. And yet, he had not been able to sense Ben Skywalker at all since he and the Khai girl had fled into the forest. It was equally possible that, somehow, Ben Skywalker had learned to hide his presence in the Force.

Or, he could just be a Yuuzhan Vong in a masquer.

There was one way to find out.

He reaches deep within the heart of the volcano itself, feels the molten energy of the planet's heart churning angrily beneath the shield of black rock, and with all the power of the Dark Side he strokes that liquid flame.

He stopped ten meters away from the crashed vessel. Wyyrlok and his other warriors stopped a meter behind him. He looked up and stared at the red-haired boy, searching for some features that matched the angry, blond-haired Skywalker from his vision. This Skywalker was younger and thinner; more, he possessed a sense of poise and calm so like his father, so unlike his grandfather.

"Are you Ben Skywalker?" Krayt called up. "Or are you an illusion, cast by this living planet?"

"What does the Force tell you?" Skywalker spread his arms.

"The Force tells me that Vestara Khai betrayed me out of cowardice. It tells me that Jaina Solo, Sword of the Jedi, burns with righteous anger because it is all she has left."

"So you did your homework," Jaina said. "Do you want applause?"

"No. Only an ending."

He didn't ignite his lightsabers. He didn't raise a hand to cast Force lightning. He merely stood where he was, grabbed hold of the dead Sekotan shuttle with his mind, and *tore*.

He caught all three of them by surprise. The mountain shifted, rocked, crumbled as the shuttle lurched into the sky. Vestara lost footing and fell. Ben Skywalker jumped back, after her. Jaina Solo crouched and clung to the ship as it hung in the air, casting a dark shadow on Krayt and his people.

"I am not in the mood for games," he told Skywalker and Vestara as they crouched on the ground, stunned but undamaged.

"Neither am I," said Jaina, and she jumped.

Knees bent, feet-forward, saber-first, Jaina Solo fell on him. She seemed to fall forever.

He ignites both sabers. He casually hurls the Sekotan ship back to the ground, and Skywalker and Vestara scramble to avoid its fall. They do, but are thrown off their feet by the force of the impact. The impact, too, shakes the ground under him but he does not waver or shake, only raises both blades up in and X to catch Jaina Solo's first strike.

Solo's saber hissed and cracked against his. Her boots landed on his chest and she kicked off him, sending him back a step while she back-flipped, whirled through the air, and landed on her feet, facing him and still brandishing her blue saber.

On her face, furious concentration.

A perfect mirror of her brother's.

And he realized, suddenly. Ben Skywalker knew how to hide himself from others in the Force. From what the One Sith knew, no other Jedi could.

But Skywalker's master had, for many years, been not a Jedi, but a Sith.

As he turns to shout a warning to his men, Darth Caedus rises from his hiding place, levels his little blaster pistol, and shoots.

The Bothan, charging forward toward Skywalker and Vestara, tumbled pathetically face-first into the rock, smoke pouring from the back of his head. His saber twitched beneath his palm, then jumped to the air and pinwheeled into the hand of a dead man.

A red blade springs to life in the hand of Darth Caedus, and Jacen Solo springs to life in the Force. No trick, no illusion. The man himself.

The entire battle stopped. Jaina paused just two meters away from Krayt's humming blades. Wyyrlok and the Elomin, advancing toward Skywalker and Vestara, stopped in their tracks and followed their Master's gaze to the pale, brown-haired man standing on the high ground.

"Impossible!" Wyyrlok spat. "Darth Caedus is dead!"

"He is," the man said. "I'm just Jacen now."

Darth Krayt wasn't shocked. He'd seen Darth Caedus in his visions, and battled him and his sister on a plain of black rock. Sith lore was filled with tales of Dark Lords who had claimed immortality, either by possessing new bodies or extending the lives of their old ones, as Krayt himself had done. But in nearly a century of studying every dark art he could find, he'd never once heard about a being resurrected from the dead, body and soul.

Krayt demanded, "Where did you learn this trick?"

"I didn't," Caedus said easily. "I just had some help from my friends."

Krayt yearned to know, *needed* to know. His body, prolonged though it was, was also dying. The parasite that clung to him could never be removed, short of death. If he could somehow die, then manifest his body again *without* the horrible Yuuzhan Vong armor, then he would be truly invincible. If he would live and die, again and again, yet remain who he was, then not even the Skywalker of his dreams would matter.

Suddenly, Skywalker (past, present, future) seems less important. If he can master whatever skills Jacen Solo had used, he'd need fear no one ever again. Not the Skywalkers, not Darth Wyyrlok, no one. Not even his own body.

"How?" Krayt demanded. "How did you do it?"

Caedus spread his arms invitingly, just as his cousin had. "If you want my secrets, A'Sharad Hett, you're welcome to them."

Of all the One Sith, only Wyyrlok knew his Dark Lord's origins as the son of a Tusken Jedi of the Old Republic. He couldn't hide his surprise, and Caedus grinned.

"Come on. I've been waiting for this for ten years."

And suddenly, this failed Sith Lord, turned reborn Jedi, seemed less impressive after all.

"Ten years," Krayt rumbled. "I have been waiting much, much longer."

He reaches deep within the heart of the volcano itself, feels the molten energy of the planet's heart churning angrily beneath the shield of black rock, and with all the power of the Dark Side he stokes that liquid flame.

The whole mountain shook, nearly throwing Jacen off his feet and gratefully wiping the smug smirk off his face. His sister, so close to striking distance, stumbled back and stared around in alarm.

Krayt gave his two servants a push, and they charged Skywalker and Vestara, sabers blazing.

As four sabers clashed, the mountain shook again. Cracks tore through the plain of black lava, and molten red began to seep out. Smoke and reeking brimstone shot like geysers from the volcano's heart.

The mountain shook once more, and black smoke bellowed from the top of the volcano. Ash fell like rain under a brilliant blue sky and pattered on the broad shoulder-plates of his armor. The mountain bucked, sending Vestara rolling like a boulder downslope toward the distant shoreline. Skywalker lurched after her; Wyyrlok and the Elomin after him.

As for Krayt, he had the sister in front of him, the brother to his side. Both were coughing and wiping ash from their faces. Krayt stood with two lightsabers blazing at his sides and waited.

When they both had clear throats and clear eyes, and stood in battle stances with sabers angled toward him, the Dark Lord said, "Begin."

They begin.

Chapter 32

When her Sekotan shuttle glided into *Phoenix's* landing bay, Jesmin had allowed herself a sigh of relief. Staring down a massive Yuuzhan Vong fleet had not been a calming experience. After landing on the star destroyer now captained by Admiral Kre'fey, trusted ally and veteran commander, she felt further relief that she wouldn't be called on to do anything crazy, like run around and shoot at Yuuzhan Vong when she still had bacta patches bulging beneath her trouser-leg.

At least she didn't have to hobble around on that crutch when she disembarked along with Sharr, Huhunna, and Drikall.

Theirs wasn't the only Sekotan group disembarking, and Jesmin was impressed by the efficiency of the deck crew as they handled the strange new ships. She didn't know how many of them were *Phoenix's* native crew and how many had been shuttled over from other ships to make the up for the ones killed in action or imprisoned. At the moment, crisis and professionalism seemed to have drawn together the disparate groups into one cohesive unit.

"Well, what happens now?" Drikall said as they exited the hangar. "We can't just sit out the rest of the fight."

A part of Jesmin would have been perfectly okay with that, but another would have felt ashamed for staying safe while the rest of her squad was in danger. Beside her, Huhunna growled something to the effect that someone might need Drikall's medical expertise, though where that left the rest of them she didn't know.

"Let's try and get to a comm station," Sharr said. "We should be able to ask Kre'fey or someone on the bridge what to do."

"I didn't see any snubfighters we could use," Drikall said.

Huhunna roared something to the effect that they were probably all launched and in combat right now.

"I'm not sure I could handle a snubfighter right now," Jesmin that. "The acceleration force might muck up my leg."

"Oh, that's right," Sharr said. "Well, don't worry, I'm sure Kre'fey can find work even for our resident cripple."

"I am *not* a cripple!" she protested. "I got stabbed in the leg by a karking Sith!"

"We know, we know. I'm just saying, you *could* have pulled a Scut and stuck one of those things on your leg."

"Oh no. I would never—"

The hallway shook violently, throwing Jesmin into one wall and Drikall into another. Sharr tumbled against Huhunna's furry chest while the Wookiee let out a roar of surprise.

"That's not good," Drikall moaned.

Red lights starting flashing in the hallway and klaxons blared.

"Oh, *really* not good."

The hallway shook again, not as violently this time but still enough to tip Jesmin off-balance. Sharr kept on his feet only to be pushed out of the way by a line of Alliance troopers in plated armor charging in the direction of the hangar.

"Hey, what is it?" Sharr shouted at their backs. "What's going on?"

He got his answer with another violet jerk. This time it was accompanied by the sound of an explosion at the end of the hall.

"Are we hit?" Jesmin said.

"No decompression," Sharr shook his head. "It's like—"

The sound of laser blasts filled the air, and beneath them, angry voices shouting "*Do ro'ik Vong pratte! Do ro'ik Vong pratte!*"

Boarding parties.

"Okay, everyone fall back!" Sharr shouted. "Fall back now!"

Drikall was already racing down the hall, away from the fighting near the hangar, with Huhunna catching up fast. Jesmin forced her body into motion, ignoring the pain that shot up her leg every time it pushed hard off the deck. She couldn't

move as fast as Drikall or Huhunna, but Sharr hung back with her. Another line of Alliance troops tore down the hallway toward the hangar, and they had to press themselves against the wall to clear the way.

"We need weapons," Jesmin told Sharr.

"If this ship is laid out like *Starless*, there should be a weapons locker not far from here."

"Where?"

"Gimme a sec, I need to think. Let's find Climber and Healer."

They ran down the hall, hooked a right, and saw the other two still running up ahead.

"Make a left!" Sharr called ahead. "Left!"

Drikall and Huhunna seemed to hear, and they made a turn at the end of the hall. When Jesmin and Sharr caught up with them, they were standing in the middle of a small storage room. All the lockers on the walls were open and empty weapon crates were strewn over the floor.

"Somebody got here first," Sharr observed.

Drikall and Huhunna began looking through the lockers anyway. Huhunna found a case full of grenades and passed them around, two each. Sharr found a Blastech E-25 long-barrel rifle still in its case with a set of backup power packs. There was also a case with five small Czerka sidearms, more than enough to share.

Still, Jesmin would have felt a lot better with a heavy repeating blaster and some tactical gear. At least she had her lightsaber, not that she was a master with it.

The sounds of explosions and blasterfire were muffled by the wall but growing steadily nearer. Huhunna trilled and cautiously moved for the door. Jesmin edged herself forward as well. She stuck her head into the hallway and saw no sign of anyone, Alliance or Vong, but the sounds of fighting were clearer too. They were probably right around the corner.

As if in confirmation, an explosion rocked the hallway, spewing black smoke and debris into view. She saw an Alliance trooper stumble and fall, then saw a Yuuzhan Vong warrior step over him and drive an amphistaff downward, skewering the man in the back.

Then more Yuuzhan Vong rounded the corner and started down the hall.

"Get in, get in!" Jesmin waved the others back. "We have to close the door! Lock it!"

"Give me a sec," Sharr slid over to the control panel. "This might be tricky. I don't have the codes."

"Just *close* them!"

He punched a few buttons, but nothing happened.

"Oh, come on!" Drikall groaned.

"It's not my fault!" Sharr pounded the wall. "It's not my rodding fault!"

"Get back!" Jesmin shouted and pulled the grenade from her belt. She squeezed the switch, tossed it in the air, and propelled it with the Force. It fell out the door, around the corner, and right into the faces of the approaching Vong.

The explosion shook the hall deck and sent smoke drifting into the room, along with the smell of charred flesh. It was quite satisfactory.

"See?" Sharr said. "Knew you were good for something."

Huhunna edged back toward the door and cautiously looked out. The Wookiee ducked back inside a split-second later, and a hail of thud bugs flew through where her head had just been.

Huhunna roared that there were too many of them. Sharr pulled out his own grenade, looked to Jesmin, and said, "You wanna do that trick again?"

"Looks like I have to. I—"

A hail of blasterfire filled the hallway. She heard the cries of the Yuuzhan Vong, and saw a second rain of thud bugs sail past the open door, but the later blasts kept coming.

When they finally stopped, Jesmin had no doubt that all the attacking Vong were dead.

Jesmin edged toward the door and cautiously peeked out. She couldn't contain a yelp of surprise at the four figures directly in front of her: Four Mandalorian warriors in full armor and helmets, smoking blaster rifles still up in firing position.

She held up both hands and said the only thing that came to mind, "Um, thanks."

The Mandos lowered their weapons. The one with strange multi-colored armor plating said, "Nice grenade trick, Jedi."

"Huh?" Jesmin blinked, then looked down at the lightsaber hanging from her belt. "I'm, uh, not a Jedi exactly."

"More of a drop-out," Sharr he stepped out behind her and clapped her the shoulder. "Thanks for the help again."

"Again?" Jesmin asked.

"The Goddess's *Mando* buddies," Sharr said. "Helped us defend the hyperdrives during the last attack."

"Oh," Jesmin said. Then she noticed the two lightsabers hanging from the lead Mando's belt. "What are *you* then?"

"No Jedi," the man said with a defensive tone.

"Well, okay. That, uh, makes two of us."

Behind her, Huhunna groaned impatiently.

"The Wook's right," said the tall one wearing the battered helmet of an ancient Clone Commando. "Plenty more crab boys need killing."

"Hold," the Mando in blue armor held up her hand. "Someone's coming."

Jesmin heard it: the low rumble of footsteps, a lot of them. She stretched out with her senses and felt a vague mass of people, anxious and angry.

"Not Vong," she said. "I can feel them in the Force."

"She's right," the lead Mando said.

The Mandos turned and went down the hall toward the approaching rumble. The Wraiths followed, and when they rounded the corner Jesmin could see a mass of people over the Mandalorians' bulky armored shoulders. Many, but not all, were wearing Alliance uniforms and combat armor.

"Hold!" someone cried in the other group. "Soldiers, what is your aim?"

Before the Mandos could reply, Sharr shouted, "We want to defend this ship."

"And you?" the voice asked, probably to the Mandalorians.

"The same," the leader said.

"Good. So is ours. We have extra arms if you need them."

"My people could use some rifles," Sharr called as he elbowed his way through the Mandalorians.

The other Wraiths followed, and when Jesmin got next to Sharr she saw a halfway packed with a motley collection of beings, many humans but also various aliens, even Chiss.

Regardless of race, all cradled rifles or heavy blasters like sacred possessions.

At the head of the group was a silver-furred Bothan dressed in a torn and bloodstained uniform. He had one arm in a sling but with the other he gestured some of his people forward. They slung heavy blasters off their shoulders and handed them to Jesmin, Huhunna, and Drikall.

"We appreciate the help. We need every able-bodied being to defend this ship." the Bothan bore his fangs in a fierce smile. "My ship."

The old Bothan gave orders like a seasoned commander. He didn't have the most up-to-date tactical information on the Yuuzhan Vong's location, but he knew every hallway, lift, and access tube in the entire vessel. He split the group into teams and ordered them to block off every exit route from the hangar bay.

Venku, Jendri, Bess, and Mereel were assigned to the Bothan's own team, along with the tall blond with the lightsaber. Their mission was to retake the hangar control station, which would allow them to de-pressurize that section of the ship and suck the Vong off their beachhead and into the vacuum. Apparently, they were there for protection as much as they were for offense; the Bothan thought those sabers were good defensive tools.

The Wookiee, the Devaronian, and the human were sent with another team to secure the medical deck, but Blondie didn't seem distraught at being separated from her *vode*. Like a good soldier, she was focused on the task at hand.

As the Mandalorians led the team down a secure corridor, Mereel's voice scratched in Venku's helmet comlink. "They're following his every order without question. Who is this furball?"

"Don't you know anything?" Bess said. "That's Aref'ja, the True Victory commander."

"Aref'ja? Shouldn't he be in the brig or something?"

"They probably need all the hands they can get right now," Venku said.

He turned a corner onto another long hallway, and saw a group of Yuuzhan Vong on the far end. The warriors immediately charged forward, and he raised his rifle to fire.

The other Alliance troops in the party started shooting as well. They dropped a few Vong, but others took shots to their armored torsos, stumbled, but kept charging. Some of them raised their amphistaffs to attack, and Venku let his rifle hang loose from its shoulder-strap and switched to his lightsabers. As his blades sparked to life he heard another *snap-hiss-hum* and saw Blondie swing her own weapon up.

The Vong hurled themselves forward. The armored *Mandos* were the front line of defense, which was good, because their airtight plating and helmets blocked the venomous sprays from the amphistaffs. The Alliance troops didn't have much in the way of melee weapons, but Jendri, Bess, and Mereel were able to whip out their *beskar* combat knives and start hacking.

Venku's double blades helped him parry and stab at the same time. He skewered one Vong in the gut, kicked him away, and blocked an attack from another. He spun his second blade around and cut the second Vong's legs at the knees. The creature howled, tumbled, fell.

Even with the 360-degree-scope of his helmet, he didn't notice the Vong coming at his flank until it was too late. He pivoted to block, but knew his sabers couldn't get up in time.

Then Blondie flashed in from the side and thrust her lightsaber into the Vong's chest, right beneath the armpit. The Vong howled, dropped his staff, and fell.

"Thanks," Venku told her, but his helmet speaker wasn't on, and she never heard.

That was fine, since another Yuuzhan Vong was swinging at her wildly. She was forced to take one step back, then another, and quickly found herself with her back against the corridor wall. The Vong looked like it was going to smash her own saber back in her face with the force of his own swings.

Luckily, that meant he wasn't paying attention to the *Mando* coming up behind him.

Venku held his blades up in an X formation and shoved them forward. When they hit the Vong's neck and scraped against his armor plating, Venku pulled his blades apart, and they sliced

like scissors through the creature's neck. Its head rolled to the floor and its body swayed for a second before tumbling down.

By then, the Vong party had more or less been taken care of. Some ten warriors lay dead in the corridor, along with a half-dozen Alliance marines. One of the ones still standing helped Arefja to his feet. There was fresh blood on his uniform; it looked like the wound on his arm had been re-opened. The Bothan was in no condition to be in the middle of this fight, but that didn't deter him.

"Go on!" he stabbed his good paw forward. "We're almost there. There's blast doors. We might need to break them down."

Venku switched his external speakers on and said, "Blondie's got a tool for that."

"As long as you've got grenades," she nodded. "And call me Jesmin. Or Ranger."

"Then it's Venku. Or *Kad'ika*."

He shut off his lightsabers, stuck them back on his belt, and slung the rifle off his shoulder. Jesmin, however, kept her saber buzzing. She took the lead and Venku followed close behind.

"You sure you're not a Jedi?" he asked her in a low voice. She certainly looked Jedi-like at the moment, all fiery sword and righteous determination.

"I'm *not*. My mom is a Jedi. I couldn't hack it."

He remembered a soft touch and whispered word, as vivid as life and surreal as a dream.

"What about you?" she asked.

His voice faltered. "Same thing, more or less."

"Hold!" Arefja called from behind. The Bothan staggered up to the front of the line and told them, "The command center is right ahead. Past this left turn, there's a long corridor, too long to just throw grenades down. They'll probably have barricades at the end, or even the blast doors."

"Not a problem if you got grenades *and* the Force," Jesmin said.

Arefja waved a pair of Alliance marines up. They pulled out a pair of grenades and handed them over, one to Jesmin and one to Venku.

"We could do more," Venku offered.

"We don't want to collapse the whole corridor," said Aref'ja. "Two are enough."

"Okay, fine by me," Jesmin said. "Let's do this."

"Yeah, let's."

Venku crept ahead to the turn in the corridor. He held a hand up, commanding the others to stop, then peeked his helmet over the edge. His sensors took it all in an instant: three crab boys behind a barricade of debris, and behind them, a pair of blast doors that were almost entirely slid shut. There was a gap in between with enough room for a being to slide through single-file. Likely the Vong hadn't bothered to figure out how to lock and unlock the doors.

He looked to Jesmin and thumbed his grenade on. She did the same. Together they tossed their explosives into the hall, took hold of them with the Force, and hurled them further down the corridor. He heard the scramble of surprised Vong just before the entire deck rocked with explosions.

They didn't wait for the smoke to clear. Venku switched his helmet visor to infrared and charged ahead, the other *Mandos* right behind him. The explosions had more than knocked out the guard, but others were charging through the smoking wreckage of the blast doors. Venku dropped one with a headshot, then another. The Alliance marines joined his *Mandos* in raining laser-fire down the corridor. The few Vong that didn't drop unfurled their amphistaffs threw themselves into the mass of attacking soldiers. Venku pulled his lightsabers and plunged both into the belly of the nearest Vong. He heard the scrape of another staff against Mandalorian armor and the hum of Jesmin's lightsaber.

All in all, the Yuuzhan Vong didn't stand a chance.

When the last one fell, Venku finally switched his visor back to normal visual. The hallway was strewn with more bodies and scorched debris. Alliance marines were already pushing through the ruined blast doors and into the command center.

He saw Jesmin bent over next to a marine. They stood up slowly, holding Aref'ja between them. There was more blood on his uniform. His sling was soaked in it, which was bad enough, but Venku saw another spot of it that seemed to be welling from his abdomen.

"Poor *chakaar* isn't going to last much longer," Mereel said over their secure comlink.

"He got us where we needed to be," Bess said with unusual respect.

"Come on," Venku turned to the blast doors. "Let's see if it was worth it."

When he entered the command station, he saw that most of the crewman's seats held bodies that had been bloodily hacked and mutilated. He was glad his helmet was air-tight; otherwise he would have to smell the carnage.

The marines were already working the consoles when Jesmin helped drag Aref'ja inside. They looked around for a seat to put him on, but there wasn't one free. It was Mereel who walked over to the comm station, pulled a headless corpse out of its chair, and gestured for Aref'ja to sit.

They dropped the Bothan into the seat, but he still struggled to hold himself erect. His little golden eyes blinked, like he was trying very hard to stay awake. Venku looked at Jesmin and she shook her head sadly.

"Do it," Aref'ja rasped. "Drop the air shield."

"Admiral, we need the passcode," a marine said.

For a moment it seemed like Aref'ja hadn't heard, or was too weak to speak. Then the Bothan said, "Evyn. The executive override code is Evyn. E-V-Y-N."

"Copy that," the marine punched something into the console. "Admiral, it's done."

Venku went over to the broad windows that overlooked the hangar bay. He watched as the Yuuzhan Vong on the main deck were pulled out into the void; first the smaller warriors, then the bigger ones, then their ships and equipment. Some of the other ships in the bay, including the Sekotan shuttles, started to be dragged across the deck by the pull of the air as it gushed out of the ship.

Being sucked into space was an awful way to die, but Venku didn't feel sorry for them. All had to do was look at the carnage in the command station and his empathy went away.

Bess, Mereel, Jendri, and a lot of the marines had also moved to the windows to watch the Vong get flushed out into space. Not Jesmin, though. She stayed with Aref'ja, one hand on his

shoulder, like she was trying to pour her own strength into the Bothan's dying body.

"Is it... done?" Aref'ja rasped.

"Yes, Admiral," said a marine.

"Good..." Aref'ja nodded. His eyelids closed and Venku didn't expect them to open again. A moment later, though, they fluttered wide and he said, "Get me a link... to the bridge."

"Got it," Jesmin said, and punched something into the communications console. She leaned in close to the speaker grill and said, "Bridge, this is Hangar Bay control. Do you copy?"

At first there was no sound, and Venku was certain the communication line had been cut. Then a female voice said, "Control, this is Bridge. We thought you were gone."

"We've retaken the command deck and shut down the vacuum seal," Jesmin explained. "We sucked 'em all into space. The hangar is secure, repeat, the hangar is secure."

The woman on the other end relayed the message to someone else, and Venku could hear muffled cheering over the comm.

"Can we speak to Admiral Kre'fey?" Jesmin pressed. "Is Kre'fey there?"

"One moment," the woman said. "Here he is."

"Hangar command, this is Kre'fey," a new voice came on. "Well done. You're to be congratulated."

Weakly, Aref'ja said, "Couldn't let them take my ship."

"Bren! Is that you?"

"We did it, Traest. We... ah...."

"Bren? What happened? Bren?" The alarm in Kre'fey voice was naked and surprising.

"I'm sorry, Admiral," Jesmin said. "He was wounded in the battle. He's, ah...."

As Jesmin fumbled for the right euphemism Aref'ja said, "Traest... Good enough... Payback for... Evyn..."

The Bothan's head dipped into his chest. His body shuddered, very slightly, and was still.

"Bren, hold on. I'll call a medical team. Bren?"

"I'm sorry, Admiral," Jesmin said. "He's gone."

A long, drawn silence held over the comlink. Finally, Kre'fey said, "Very well. How many of you are left?"

Jesmin looked around the command center for a quick head-count. "We have fifteen people, sir."

"I see." He sounded grave, but said no more.

"Admiral," Jesmin pressed, "What are our orders?"

"Securing the hangar bay was critical and commendable," the Bothan said. "However, enough of the Yuuzhan Vong have advanced beyond the beachhead to become a threat."

"What does that mean?" Venku said aloud.

"Yuuzhan Vong battle groups have advanced deeper into *Phoenix*. They seem to be advancing on the bridge. We assume their goal is to take the command station and helm, so they can turn *Phoenix* on our own ships."

"*Fierfek*," Mereel swore.

"They've lost their beachhead," Jesmin said. "They have to know they can't escape."

"*Vongese* don't care about escape, just dying gloriously," Venku said.

"Whoever that was, he was right," Kre'fey said. "Most of our people were in the hangar area, trying to secure it. The Vong are advancing quickly through undermanned decks."

"Then we'll go after them," one of the marines said.

"Thank you. We need all the help we can get." If nothing else, Venku gave Kre'fey credit for not sugar-coating. "Please, hurry."

"What about—" Jesmin said, then stopped. Her eyes never left Aref'ja's body, but she said, "We copy, Admiral. We're on our way."

She shut the link off, but still couldn't take her eyes off the dead Bothan. The marines watched the scene for only a moment before their commander whistled and motioned for them to fall out.

As the Mandalorians moved to follow, Venku placed a hand on Jesmin's shoulder and said, "Come on. We save the bridge or he died for nothing."

"Okay," Jesmin stared up at him like she could see through his black visor and into his eyes. "Let's finish this."

Chapter 33

High above, black smoke belched into the sky from the distant volcano-mouth, blocking out the sun. Beneath them, the ground shuddered and shook. Great cracks tore and thundered through the black-stone plain, and red lava began to seep up from the insides of the mountain and flow fast toward the sea, where it churned out fountains of gray steam to match the black smoke.

Vestara Khai barely noticed as the world around her broke into fiery ruin. Her mind could track three variables and no more: Darth Wyyrlok, the Elomin swordsman, and Ben Skywalker. All four of them moved in an elegant lethal dance across the buckling, smoking plain. Her body was constantly moving: hopping from one stone to another, somersaulting, swiping out with her one arm or raising it up to deflect the swing of a red lightsaber.

As she fought, she knew she could not win. The Elomin was faster and more nimble than even the best Sabers on Kesh. Darth Wyyrlok was a surge of dark energy, alternating powerful blows from his lightsaber with bursts of Force-lightning from his free hand. When she tried to block his energy-bursts with her blade, the Elomin moved in to strike. It was only by staying separate, and constantly moving, that Ben and Vestara managed to keep alive.

As they fought, her mind touched with Ben's freely, and his touched hers. For the first time, there was no attempt at deception. Everything flowed freely through their battle-meld: the adrenaline-rush of anger, the bursts of fear, the exhilaration at surviving every attack. Sometimes she didn't know what feelings were hers and which were Ben's, but they *had* to share

it all, because any hesitation, any conscious thought, any distraction, would mean death for them both.

Even as they battled desperately for their lives, a part of Vestara was thrilled that finally, at long last, they had come together as one.

When a particularly massive groundquake rumbled through the plain, Ben was knocked off-balance, slipped on the smooth volcanic rock, and fell. Vestara reached out with the Force, grabbed him, picked him up-

-and barely got her lightsaber up to deflect another wash of lightning from Wyyrlok. The Elomin rushed toward Ben, and she screamed warning to him in the Force. Ben, halfway erect again, dropped into the sudden crouched. The Elomin's thrust went over his head, but the Sith twisted his elbows down and swept his red blade after Ben's body as it rolled across the smooth black rock. Ben's lightsaber, still blazing, cut a scorching line through the stone, and as he came up to his feet and faced the Elomin, red lava began to bubble up through the narrow arc of the lightsaber's cut. The Elomin stepped back to avoid getting his feet scorched, exposing his back.

Vestara saw her chance and lunged, even as Wyyrlok continued to hurl Force-lightning at her. She felt dark energy sear her skin and spark in her hair, tasted its acrid ozone on her tongue, but she didn't stop. She threw herself right into the Elomin, saber-first. Her blade thrust into his back and came out his chest. She hit him hard and they both tumbled to the rock.

In a second she was up again. Wyyrlok had stopped his lightning attacks and was facing off against Ben. His scowling, tattooed face seemed unmoved by the loss of his partner.

"Two against one," Ben said. "You want to surrender?"

She knew Wyyrlok wouldn't, and in the Force, she could tell Ben knew it too. But being a Skywalker, he wanted to give the Sith one last chance.

Don't be too confident! She told him.

I'm not, he sent back, and for the first time in the battle she sensed the naked terror that lay beneath his energy and courage.

Wyyrlok lowered his saber slightly, so that its tip angled toward Ben's chest. He tilted his head back to look at the

smoke still pouring into the sky, obscuring the bright sun and blue sky. Behind him Vestara saw the white foam of crashing waves, and realized how close they had come to shore.

Wyyrlok lowered his head again. He reached out with his free hand, and the fallen Sith's lightsaber slapped into his palm. With a snap and a hiss, a second blade extended from his fist.

Then he attacked.

He was faster than before. His red blades spun and swept them both back. With only one arm, Vestara had to call on the Force to withstand blow after heavy blow from the massive, stronger Sith Lord. Wyyrlok forced her and Ben back, step by step, toward the edge of the black plain, where jagged chunks of rock fell into the sea. Waves crashed behind her and salty spray tickled her face, but she barely noticed.

It was Ben who stumbled first. His boots slipped on the water-slick rocks and his whole body pitched back. For a moment, Ben's shock overwhelmed Vestara's own senses.

Then she felt nothing except white, searing pain.

When the white receded enough for thoughts to come, she found she was on her knees, staring at the tattered black hem of Wyyrlok's cloak. She stared at her hand. Her hand clasped her lightsaber- no, not hers, Jaina Solo's lightsaber, the one used to kill Darth Caedus. Her hand lay on the black, water-slick rock in front of her. She stared at the stump of her remaining arm, cut clean and cauterized just below the wrist. She didn't even have the strength to scream.

Darth Wyyrlok picked up Jaina Solo's lightsaber, examined it with distaste, then casually tossed it over his shoulder, where it clattered across black rock.

Then she felt her legs lift off the ground. They dangled beneath her body as she levitated under the Sith Lord's power. Her vision swam, and she could not hold Wyyrlok's powerful gold-eyed gaze even if she wanted to. A lightsaber still blazed in each of his hands.

Her body turned in mid-air, slowly, until she faced the ocean, the wave-battered chunks of black rock, and Ben. He was standing on one of those chunks. The legs of his trousers were dark with spray. A big wave crashed behind him, briefly flashing a foam-white halo behind his head.

Behind her, Wyyrlok said, "Surrender, or I will kill her."

Ben didn't move, didn't say a thing. Vestara willed focus back into her eyes until she could hold Ben's own. She could see the terror there, and the shock, and worst of all, the indecision.

She tried to mouth the words 'Don't do it,' but Wyyrlok's invisible hand tightened on her throat, freezing her jaw in an open gasp for air.

"Make your choice, boy," Wyyrlok growled. "If you surrender now, neither you nor her will be hurt. In time, you will both become vital members of One Sith. *Together.*"

She could see it in his eyes, feel it in the Force: He was considering it. He could never walk the path of the Sith, but he was thinking he could pretend, for a while, because it was the only way the two of them could get out of this alive. When she'd first met Ben, her father and Lord Taalon had wanted nothing more than to use her to turn Ben to the Dark Side. In the beginning, she had wanted that as well. Now nothing seemed more horrible.

Ben was not like her and could never be. He was too honest, too noble, too forgiving, too good. He looked into the hearts of every being and saw not tools to manipulate, or sources of power, but the potential in each of those hearts for something better.

He was everything she envied, and everything she'd lost before she knew it could ever be found. She would give her life to protect those things.

She didn't know if that was what love truly meant, but it was the closest thing someone like her could ever have.

So Vestara did what Ben couldn't do. She cut off their link through the Force, and immediately ached with its loss. Then she threw herself into that loss, and all the other losses she'd experienced: her father, her clan, even Ship. She let the pain gnaw into her, relished, drew strength from it as the Sith had taught her to. She let it surge through her body until she was ready to burst.

Then she threw her head back and screamed.

When Vestara shut off their connection through the Force, Ben felt an instant of shock, like his heart had been torn out of

his chest. He could see the grief on Vestara's face, and he had no idea why she had done it.

Then she threw her head back and screamed, and Ben understood.

Grief and pain and anger poured out of her as raw burst of Force energy, like the lightning Wyyrlok had just thrown but without the direction and control. Energy crackled through Vestara, dancing across her skin, sparking through her hair, blue-blazing white in her dark eyes. The Force energy she poured out of herself groped hungrily for another source, like electric current seeking to jump.

Ben, stuck on his wet rock, was too far away.

Darth Wyyrlok wasn't.

She caught the Sith Lord by surprise. Dark energy crackled through his body, just as it did hers, and for an agonizing moment both bodies turned luminous with Force lightning. Wyyrlok's head fell back, his jaw opened, and his deep, tortured scream joined Vestara's.

Ben leaped forward. He slid onto the black rock ledge, fell, and scrambled to his feet. He reached out with the Force, calling Jaina's lightsaber to his free hand. It slapped into his palm, ignited. Two violet blades blazed ahead of him and he thrust them into Wyyrlok's body.

There was another blast of Force energy, stronger than ever. It threw him backward and to the ground; both lightsabers went clattering across the rocks. His head cracked and his vision flared with red.

When the red went away he found himself staring at Wyyrlok's body as it loomed over the crumpled, smoking form of Vestara Khai.

A breeze blew, stirred Wyyrlok's black cloak and tipped his body toward the edge. His head turned, slightly, and his red-gold eyes found Ben's. Then his eyes lost focus and his jaw slacked open. Smoke escaped from between two rows of pointed teeth.

Then he tumbled, and fell.

Ben heard the splash as his body hit the water. He fought back the pain and scrambled on all fours to the edge. He saw a

black-cloaked body, face-down, being tossed by waves and dashed upon the rocks.

A voice in his head asked, very weakly, *Did we do it?*

Ben gasped and moved, still on all fours, over to Vestara's smoking form. Smoke still rose from her tattered clothes and her long dark hair had been reduced to scattered, scorched tangles clinging to her scalp. Ash mixed with the salt water on her face, but Ben reached down and tried to wipe them off her cheeks and forehead. Her eyes were shut, but at his touch they flickered open with great effort.

"Yes, Yes, hang in there," he said, though he could feel her fading in the Force. He pulled her broken body up in both arms, pressing her face against his chest, as though that would make any difference.

In his mind, she said again, *Did we do it?*

"We did it," he muttered into the scorched wires of her hair. He held her so close he could feel the faint beating of her heart against his chest, the slight contractions of her breathing.

So glad.

"Yes, don't go. Please. There might be something in the ship we could use, and I can—"

No.

"Yes, *please!*" he choked. "I have to save you!"

You did.

It couldn't end like this, it *couldn't*. Not after all they'd been through. During the fight against Wyyrlok their minds had touched, for the first time unhindered the deceptions they were constantly playing on each other and on themselves. For that moment, beneath the frenzy and heat of battle, he had finally understood Vestara for who she really was: the product of those who made her, constantly striving to make her own path, so often failing, yet every time she was knocked over got back up again. Unlike Ben, she had no family and friends to pull her to her feet and keep her on the right path. For Vestara, all she'd had was determination and pain. In a way, she'd been like Jacen at the end.

But he understood that now, finally, and just as he'd forgiven Jacen he'd found he could truly forgive Vestara. And, after understanding and forgiveness, he'd even allowed himself to

hope that, just maybe, they could pass together through these trials and emerge and something new, together: not two Jedi, certainly not two Sith, but maybe, at long last, real people, the kind they'd always wanted to be, separate and independent from the orders they'd been born into.

"Hey, Ben?" a voice said softly in his ear.

Ben jerked upright. Vestara was standing in front of him, looking down with a sad, wistful smile on her smooth white face. Her two arms were crossed over her chest and the long hair around her shoulders didn't blow with the wind.

There was nothing in his arms and lap except a pile of rags.

"Oh, Ves," he said frantically. "I'm so sorry. I should have done something. I should have—"

Vestara shook her head. "It's okay, Ben. Really. I'm fine with how things turned out."

And he could see on her face that she was. That smile was sad, yes, and it was worn down by so many regrets, but in that smile were was also the firm belief that everything, no matter how awful, had been worth it in the end.

"I'm going to miss you," he said.

"I'll miss you too, Ben, but it's time for me to go."

"Vestara, wait—" he shouted, then stopped. He knew what he wanted to say, but he couldn't force the words out of his mouth.

Her ghost stared at him, patiently waiting.

"I loved you, Ves," he croaked. "I really did."

"I figured that out a while ago." Her smile took on a bemused tilt. "You had it in the end, Ben. You were right, and I was wrong. Love does make you strong after all."

A wave crashed on the rocks, and a rain of white spray fell on the shore. Ben wiped water from his eyes and licked salty off his lips. When his vision cleared, Vestara was gone.

Chapter 34

The cloud-streaked sky and the gently rocking ocean struck a peaceful note that utterly belied the tension of the scene. The Sith vessel's black disc sat on the surface, bobbing with the waves, while the smaller Sekotan shuttle sat half-submerged next to it.

When the shuttle's dorsal hatch opened, Tahiri was the first one out. She stood for a moment, carefully balanced on the shuttle's smooth curved hull as it rocked with the waves, then hopped down to the wing and walked to the edge. Scut was right behind her, and right behind him, some two dozen Yuuzhan Vong followed.

While the rest of them were dressed in various organic armor plating, Scut and Tahiri wore flexible dark camo jumpsuits with lightweight armored chestplates, black boots, and belts laden with tools and weapons. As he stood behind Tahiri, looking over her blond head at the Sith vessel bobbing just a few meters beyond, he slung his BlastTech rifle off his shoulder, checked the power pack, and carefully slid his finger over the trigger. There was no telling when some saber-wielding Sith would pop out of the hatch and start killing everyone.

Tahiri looked surprisingly calm. She had a lightsaber in one hand, an amphistaff in the other. She closed her eyes, let the wind and salty spray tickle her face, and took deep breaths.

Scut glanced over his shoulder at the other Yuuzhan Vong. All his life he'd thought about what it would be like to meet the race that had given birth to him, the one that had rejected him, the one that had kept him enthralled all his life with mixed feelings of fascination and horror. More than anything, he'd wondered what it would be like to go around all day without wearing a masquer.

The ones looking at his naked face now, from the warriors to the handful of Extolled to the lone shaper, all showed a unity of determination and purpose. It was a unity he couldn't help but feel, even if he wore clothes like a human and had a tizroywm wriggling in his ear to translate their words.

The shuttle wing moved beneath his feet, knocking him out of his reverie. The other Yuuzhan Vong carefully shifted their weight so as to keep from falling into the ocean. Scut looked at Tahiri and saw her eyes closed. He realized she was using the Force to nudge the shuttle's wing-tip right alongside the Sith vessel.

In the end, the two ships touched with a barely-audible *clank*. When it was done, Tahiri didn't turn around to urge the others on. She simply hopped over, like a child stepping stones.

Scut followed without hesitation, as did the others. They fanned out across the vessel's black surface. The plating under their feet was not metal, but it was not like yorik coral or any organic material Scut had ever seen. It was shiny and reflective, but not smooth like a Sekotan ship. He leaned close, rested his hand on the surface, and felt some faint warmth, though that could have just been residual heat from re-entry.

Kodra Val crouched next to him and said, "This is a fascinating vessel. Perhaps we can preserve it for study."

Scut agreed, but he knew they had higher priorities. "Right now I just want to make it through alive."

"And you trust that blaster-weapon to do it for you?"

"I've got to trust something."

Kodra Val made a disappointed noise.

Before Scut could say anything, a hissing sound brought him to his feet. He saw, on the far side of the disc, a burst of steam rising through the air. Tahiri had ignited her lightsaber and waved for the others to stay back.

There was the pop of a pressure bubble bursting, followed by another gust of steam. Then a bone-chilling howl filled the air.

They emerged from the ship so fast Scut could hardly make sense of them. Low bodies, snake-like tails, three pairs of angled lizard-like legs, long flat heads with snapping mouths. There were two of them, and they were scrambling across the ship's surface, straight for Tahiri.

A pair of warriors threw themselves in one animal's path. It bashed one aside with its tail, sending him skidding across the black and into the water. It pinned the other warrior down with its claws, snapped its double-layered teeth in his face, but seemed to hesitate before tearing off his head, maybe because he was Yuuzhan Vong.

The other one kept charging right for Tahiri. The woman sidestepped and thrust out her lightsaber, dragging scorch marks across the animal's side. As it spun to attack, Scut found his senses and brought his blaster to bear.

He fired four shots, each of which knocked the animal back a step. A Yuuzhan Vong warrior threw himself on the creatures back and sliced downward with an amphistaff, gouging out wells of blood before the monster threw him off its back and smashed him to a bloody mess with its massive tail.

The other monster had decided to leave its captive alive. It, too, charged right for Tahiri. The woman held up her saber and her amphistaff but didn't move out of its way.

"Go!" Scut shouted, and fired another volley of shots. The monster was knocked off balance, spun around, and charged right at Scut instead.

He suddenly understood why Tahiri had froze. It's snapping teeth, its massive jaws, its pounding charge all froze him to his spot in abject fear.

"Scut!" a woman shouted. Not Tahiri; Kodra Val?

Then he remembered the grenade at his hip. He pulled it off his belt, thumbing the trigger, tossed it in the air, and jumped away.

The grenade didn't go in the monster's gullet as he'd been hoping, but it did roll over its snout and bounce right between the eyes when it went off. The concussive force the explosion knocked every being to its feet, including the other monster. As

to the one hit by the grenade, there was nothing left of its head but smoke and gore.

The remaining monster had been knocked on to its back. It writhed and struggled to get its six legs back on solid ground again. Before it could, Tahiri charged forward and plunged her lightsaber into its soft underbelly. She stabbed once, twice, three times, then swept her blade across the bottom of the animal's throat.

Finally, it was dead.

Someone tapped Scut on the shoulder. Kodra Val's mouth moved but she made no sound. There were no sounds at all, not even the murmur of waves. He tapped his head, felt the *tizrowym* stir in his ear, and heard muted words.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. His words seemed to echo in his skull. He prayed this was just the short-term effect of the concussive blast and not something more permanent.

The others were gathering around Tahiri. Scut and the shaper joined them. The blonde woman had shut off her lightsaber and was looking down at the hole the monsters had burst through.

"I sense at least one more down there," Tahiri said. He couldn't hear her words directly, or hear the sea, but when the *tizroywm* rattled in his hear he realized she was speaking Yuuzhan Vong.

"Let us go ahead of you, Riina Kwaad," Narith said. "Those monsters were targeting you."

"That's because they're *voxyn*," Tahiri said it like a curse. "They track Force-users."

"Then they won't sense us at all," Scut pointed out. "Neither will the others in the ship."

"We can be advanced guards, Riina Kwaad," the scarred warrior Kerem Charn said.

"Okay, go ahead," Tahiri said. "I'll follow in with a second team."

As Kerem Charn's warriors began to drop one-by-one into the ship, several of the smooth-faced Ganner warriors stayed with Tahiri. Kodra Val, however, took Scut by one arm and dragged him to the edge of the hole.

"Come," she said. "There is much to discover and we don't want the warriors to trash it all before we get a chance to examine it. Besides, they may need our help."

"Our help?"

"You've proven brave as well as clever." Kodra Val said seriously. "It's a rare combination, and should be quite useful."

With that, she stepped into the hole and disappeared.

"She was totally flirting with you," Tahiri deadpanned.

"Oh, shut up," Scut said, and dropped down after her.

He found himself in a curving corridor. The walls and floor were black, and made of the same slightly-uneven material as the outer hull. Somewhere beneath the skin of the hallway, blood vessels or nerve clusters spread out, branches, and pulsed with faint light.

"*Fascinating*," Kodra Val said a few meters ahead.

"Where are we going?" he said as he scampered after her.

"I have no idea. Kerem Charn's warriors are going up ahead. They are a tough bunch, and should be able to handle an attacker or two."

"Have you ever fought Sith before?"

"No. I understand they are like the Jedi, but destructive."

"Pretty much. I wouldn't want to run into one alone in a dark windy corridor."

"That is what the warriors are for. I often think--"

He heard shouting up ahead, and the *snap-hiss-hum* of lightsabers. He raised his weapon and shouldered past Kodra Val. When he caught up to the warriors, the battle was already over. One Yuuzhan Vong lay crumpled with a burning hole in his chest, while two humanoids, their faces striped with black and red tattoos, were on the ground in pools of blood.

"Excellent!" Kerem Charn cried.

The warrior bent low, scooped up some blood from one of the dead Sith, and drank.

Another warrior saw Scut and the shaper and explained, "They did not even sense our presence. We were able to take them by surprise and kill them with little struggle."

"Still, I would like a greater challenge," Kerem Charn said considerably. "Come, there must be more to hunt. The path splits. I will take the left route. Tzun Plaath, take the right."

The warriors split on their own accord, leaving Scut and Kodra Val to choose their own paths.

"Come," Kodra Val started down the left side. "I believe Tzun Plaath is a little less... bellicose."

Scut followed Kodra Val and the other warriors down another path. Just when they turned a corner, he heard the buzz of lightsabers and saw echoed flashes of red light. Two more Sith, their faces done up in red and black, were attacking. Tzun Plaath threw himself forward, only for a lightsaber to plunge out through his back. As the blade withdrew, Plaath's amphis-taff snapped up and bit the Sith in the leg. The Sith howled in pain, clasped his wounded limb, and pitched forward.

The other Sith didn't notice his comrade fall. He kept on attacking, spinning his red blade in wide fan-like movements, cutting one warrior across the throat and another across the waist. Kodra Val reached into her cloak, then tossed out a handful of thud bugs. The Sith, apparently unfamiliar with them, fumbled to block two with his lightsaber while the others slipped past and attacked his body. He tried to cut them off with his lightsaber, giving Scut the opportunity to raise his rifle and pump three shots right in the Sith's upper torso.

Just as quickly as it had begun, it was over. The corridor was strewn with bodies and blood, and only Scut and Kodra Val were left standing.

"Impressive," Kodra Val said. "You killed a Sith."

"We killed one. Call it fifty-fifty," Scut lowered his rifle and walked ahead.

The hallway terminated abruptly with a portal of some kind; likely this was what the Sith had been guarding. Scut went up to the portal and inspected it for any sort of access panel, but could find nothing.

Then, without warning, without even his touch, the portal slid open.

Scut kept his rifle raised as he went inside. He was clearly in some kind of laboratory, complete with an operating table, consoles, and the latest medical equipment you could find in hospitals all over the galaxy,

He saw a streak of dark blood running down the wall on the far side of the room. As he circled around the table to get a

better view, his eyes followed the blood trail down to the crumpled form of a Yuuzhan Vong on the floor, half-propped upright against the wall.

"Master Kwaad!" Kodra Val cried as she circled the table. She bent down next to the old shaper and carefully touched her chin, tilting her head upward.

Qelah Kwaad's eyelids twitched, then opened. Her glazed, unfocused eyes stared at Kodra Val's face.

"They attacked you, didn't they? You helped them, and they killed you for it," Kodra Val said scornfully.

Scut squatted down on the other side of the old shaper. He remembered the way she'd scorned him, then gradually forgotten that scorn when they talked about the science that motivated them both. He couldn't pretend she was a good being, or even a sane one, but he was sad to see her brilliant career end in a disheveled bloody heap.

"They say... *we* betrayed *them*." Qelah Kwaad croaked.

"This ship was shot out of the sky by the True Honor fleet," Kodra Val explained. "You've crashed in the ocean on Zonama Sekot."

Qelah Kwaad nodded weakly. "Aha. I see. Well, at least... At least I can... pay them back a little."

"What do you mean?" Scut asked.

Qelah Kwaad kept looking at Kodra Val. "They didn't kill me... as well as they should have."

Scut suddenly noticed a second trail of blood. It ran across the floor from their current position, over to a console, then back again.

"This ship is... different from ours. Very fascinating. But... The same, in some ways. It will be... breaking soon. We'll all be at the bottom of the ocean."

"What about Vilath Dal?" Kodra Val asked. "Where is he?"

"He... went back to the fleet. Probably dead now." She shuddered a dry laugh. "Serves him right. I wish I could have... finished... finished my..."

Qelah Kwaad trailed off. Her head rolled to the side and her eyes slid closed.

Kodra Val sighed. Her head hung low for a long moment before she pushed herself to her feet.

Scut rose to and asked, "What did she mean about sinking?"

"She probably ordered some kind of self-destruct," the shaper said.

"Which means we should get out of here."

"Agreed." Kodra Val looked around the lab one more time. She spotted a qahsa left untouched on the operations table. She picked it up, stuck it in her cloak, and said, "I'd like to stay here longer, but we have to go."

"Sounds good to me," Scut said. He followed Kodra Val to the portal, beyond which lay an even bloodier mess than the one inside the lab. He lingered for a moment on the threshold, looking over his shoulder at the stain on the wall that marked the end of Qelah Kwaad's life. Then the ship began to shudder.

He turned and ran.

When the ship buckled and bucked beneath their feet, it probably saved Tahiri's life. The Sith Lord she was fighting was knocked off-balance, and a swing that would have cut across her shoulder-blades became a red blur above her head.

She took the advantage where she got it and thrust her own blade up beneath the Sith's rib cage. With a flick of the wrist her stab became a slice cleaving through bone and organ, and the Sith fell dead at her feet.

Panting, she looked around the broad, round chamber. She saw the last Sith fall to his knees as a pair of warriors thrust their blades into his torso again and again. When he finally fell, he joined five other Sith and the same number of Yuuzhan Vong. Still, a dozen warriors remained standing, including Volan Kraal and Zokal Buhl. The warriors looked flushed with victory as they surveyed the battle zone.

"Riina Kwaad," Volan Kraal said, "Do you sense more Sith?"

"Not nearby, but it's hard to tell," she admitted.

The dying vessel's Force-presence was dimming, but it still had the effect of drowning out, or at least muting, the presence of other individual beings. The only thing she could sense for sure was the familiar, terrifying hunger of one more voxyn somewhere on this ship.

Despite losing half their number, Tahiri's squadron of Ganner-sect warriors had killed ten Sith already. These

warriors were not greatly experienced, but they had trained hard, and their lack of presence in the Force allowed them to surprise the Sith, just as other warriors had surprised the Jedi twenty years ago. Kerem Charn's team of more veteran soldiers had, hopefully, fared even better.

Another shake reverberated through the ship. Now Tahiri was alarmed instead of thankful.

"What is it?" she said. "What's happening to the ship?"

Another warrior appeared from the corridor. "We have just received a message. The vessel is beginning to break apart. Self-destruct."

"What?" Zokal Buhl said. "How can this be?"

"I do not know," the warrior shook his head, "But other teams are already reporting damage. Water is breaking through cracks in the hull and—"

There was another quake, one that almost threw Tahiri to her feet and brought a few wounded warriors to their knees. She felt damp patter on one shoulder and looked overhead to see streams of water beginning to fall through the cracks.

"Okay people, that's it." She said. "All teams, out the way you came. *Now.*"

Tahiri stayed back, as the warriors helped their wounded evacuate the chamber. Frequent, low-intensity rumbling shook the vessel now and she watched the cracks creep through the ceiling with every small shake.

"Riina Kwaad, come!" Zokal Buhl waved from the corridor's entry. He was the last one left standing.

Tahiri looked at the corpses in the chamber. Part of her wished she could take the bodies of the fallen warriors, but she knew Yuuzhan Vong didn't need physical remains to value their dead.

She started for the door, but another quake shook the chamber. This time it was the floor itself that groaned and split. A long crack tore across the middle of the chamber, and salty water began to well up around her feet.

"Come!" Zokal Buhl waved her forward. "The others have all gone ahead!"

She got two steps through the ankle-deep water when something surged in her awareness: terrifying, familiar hunger.

She heard the *snap-hiss-hum* of a lightsaber not her own. She looked to the corridor entrance just in time to see Zokal Buhl cut in two by a red flash. A figure in a hooded black cloak stepped out of the corridor. Behind him, the last voxyn crept forward. It circled the edge of the chamber, splashing with every step, while the Sith remained by the entrance.

Tahiri stood with a glowing saber in one hand and an amphistaff in the other. She called, "Let's get this over with before we both drown."

The Sith threw back his hood, revealing a leathery Dornean face marked by the same red-and-black tattoos as the others. His pale white eyes shone like two lamp-lights in the gloom.

"That's better," she said. "That voxyn, is he your pet?"

"Something like that," White Eyes said. "You faced them before."

"You could say that."

It would have been an understatement. Voxyn represented the turning point of her life. Voxyn represented the death of Anakin, her own downward spiral into confusion and despair, and the lingering ache of loss that had haunted her for half a life.

When she'd heard that Jaina had fought voxyn on Yavin 4, her reaction had been one of abject dread. Now the last one padded toward her across the chamber. The water was rising ever-higher, past her knees, almost to the voxyn's shoulders. It looked like some legendary sea-snake as it stepped ever closer, head tilted up to keep water from flowing into its open mouth.

The Tahiri who had faced the voxyn fifteen years ago had been very different. Better or worse it was hard to say; she'd been weaker, and more dependent on Anakin than was healthy; she'd also had more energy, more verve for life, more illusions about her special place as a Jedi. Riding the exhilaration of youth and love, she'd even thought she had a special destiny with Anakin at her side.

But fifteen years had taught her a lot. It had taught her the unpredictability of the future, the terrible costs of desire, and the danger within hope.

Most of all it had also taught her that she was more than Tahiri Veila, Jedi Knight. More than a Sith apprentice, more

than a Tusken, more than Riina Kwaad the Yuuzhan Vong. More than a big scar left by Anakin's death.

She was any of those things and all of them, at the same time.

As to which she was right now, all she had to do was chose, and act.

Facing the monster of her nightmares, she chose to be Riina Kwaad.

The animal stared at her and she stared back. She saw a strange hybrid, part from the Alliance and part Yuuzhan Vong, a Force-user that existed beyond anyone's definitions of what the Force should be. That strand of the Force, neither light nor dark, stretched between them now. She touched its mind, sensed its need and confusion and fear and hunger for something more. She discovered its soul and found a creature wrought from different pieces, used by others for different ends. But in the end, against all odds and reckoning, it was its own creature still.

So she stared into the monster and the monster stared into her, and finally, after fifteen long, hard years, she decided she no longer mourned the girl she'd been. For better or worse, that girl would never come again. There was a new Tahiri now.

The monster looked away.

"What?" White Eyes said. "What are you doing? Kill her, kill her now!"

The water had risen to her waist. The Sith stepped forward, black cloak ballooning comically around his waist as the water rose. The voxyn turned to face the most powerful Force-user in the room.

It lunged.

Through her link with the voxyn, Tahiri felt the painful stab of the Sith's lightsaber and the crunch of bone beneath hungry jaws. She smelled the blood and heard the steamy hiss of red light in water.

She looked at the chamber above. The cracks had deepened, and water was flowing down like torrential rain. She broke her connection with the voxyn and stretched out through the Force, feeling for whatever was beyond the chamber roof.

She found it, and tugged.

The room tore apart with cracking thunder. Water flooded into the ship. Tahiri was carried upward on the swelling flood. She felt one last touch from the voxyn- wounded, drowning, but happy for the prize prey it had caught- and then nothing.

She swam through the rising water until she was right beneath the crack through which all the water poured. The water tried to shove her deeper down but she resisted. She drew on the Force and the Force flowed through her and she rose up against the downpour, up through the torrent of falling water that tried to drag her back down into the dark.

The Sith vessel fell away behind her, into the endless night of Zonama's ocean depth. Water filled her ears and drowned out all sound. Everything was soundless, weightless, dark like living death.

The sunlight overhead was so distant it seemed unreachable, but she couldn't give up on it.

She didn't know how long it took for her to breach the surface. She felt as though she had passed beyond time, beyond even life and death, but she kept getting closer to the light. She felt like she was being pulled upward by the hands of another, out of the night of the ocean's depth and into bright day.

Right before her head burst through the surface, she thought she felt the light touch of a kiss on her cheek.

Then she was alive again.

She gasped for breath, paddled her legs, and waved her arms. Salt water ran down her face and into her mouth. Bright warm sunlight poured down on her skin. She kicked her body up and back so as to float on the water, face up to the blinding sun. Then she stopped kicking, stopped struggling, and let herself drift where the water willed. A pool of gold hair drifted around her face, her clothes were water-heavy, and she was soaked all the way to her skin, but all she could think about was the sun. It seemed brighter, purer, than any light she could remember, even the twin stars over Tatooine.

For the first time in a very, very long while, she felt glad to be alive.

She heard someone calling, "I see here, I see her!"

She tilted her head and saw cluster of Yuuzhan Vong standing on the back of the Sekotan ship. Scut stood at the edge of the

wing, and the shaper beside him. Of the Sith ship, there was no trace at all.

Water spread to every horizon. Waves flashed in the light.

Tahiri closed her eyes and waited for them to come for her.

Chapter 35

Fy'lyor was nearly thrown to her feet when *Chimaera's* bridge shook under the latest broadside from *Starless*. The two destroyers had been pounding each other for what seemed like an eternity. The space between them was aglow with the exchange of turbolaser batteries. Both ships' shields were on the verge of collapse, and once they failed the destroyers would probably continue gnawing at each other until both had been chewed down to black debris.

It was all madness. After the destruction of the Defenders carrying the bioweapon- destruction Fy'lyor had permitted, deaths that weighed on her shoulders- Daala had ordered an all-out assault on Trinity Fleet. Even when the Yuuzhan Vong had begun attacking, she had not commed Jagged Fel, proposing an alliance or even a temporary truce. Instead she had plunged the fleet deeper into the fray.

Fy'lyor could see it on the tactical holo now. For Jagged Fel, the situation was dire. *Lacentra* had been overtaken and destroyed by two Yuuzhan Vong cruisers. *Niathal* was crippled and trying to hold off two more. Captain Pavric's *Corusca Gem* was trying to fend off Yuuzhan Vong boarding parties, as was *Phoenix*. As for the ships that had once trusted Fy'lyor to command them, Captain Vernet and *Vindicator* were fighting for their lives against Veed's *Resolve*, while Captain Cohl and *Swift* had vanished in a ball of flame after taking too many direct hits from the Marauder corvettes. And the Yuuzhan Vong kept coming.

Daala didn't seem to care about any of that, though. She'd ordered Fy'lyor to keep pounding *Chimaera*, even as their shields overloaded and their weapon batteries began to fail from overheating.

Starless and *Chimaera* swept through space in opposite directions, and as they passed each destroyer attempted parting shots at the other's engines. Those aft shields, at least, could stand a few volleys, though Fy'lyor doubted their flank shields could withstand another broadside exchange.

"Captain," someone from the tactical section reported, "We're picking up incoming snubfighters."

"What vector?" Daala demanded from the far side of the bridge.

"They're coming from straight ahead, Admiral," the crewman said.

"What kind?" Fy'lyor asked as Daala pounced up next to her.

"Attack vessels. K-wings, B-wings."

"As nimble as Hutts," Daala sneered. "Call our fighters back. Kill them."

"Admiral, our fighters are... ah, unavailable."

"What do you mean? Where are they?"

"Admiral, they're ah... almost all destroyed. We have less than two dozen TIEs left out of the whole fighter wing."

Fy'lyor went cold. She looked at the forward viewport and stared at the black starscape for any sign of the incoming attack vessels.

"Recall more fighters!" Daala barked. "Pull of *Resolve's* fighter screen."

"Admiral," Fy'lyor protested, "Captain Veed needs those screens to--"

"We need them more," Daala said firmly. "Tell communications to--"

The deck shuddered again. Fy'lyor lurched over to the crew pit and called for damage reports, but even as the crew ran off the latest news she could see the gouges of flame pouring out of *Chimaera's* hull. The attack ships had targeted her weapon batteries while her shields were still angled to protect the engines. With her naked eyes Fy'lyor could make out four turbolaser emplacements that had been reduced to flaming ruin.

"Admiral," she turned to Daala, "We can't keep doing this. We need to stop. Now."

"Stop?" the old woman scowled.

"Call a truce with Fel, or jump to hyperspace," Fy'lyor insisted. She wasn't quite mad enough to suggest Admiral Daala surrender.

"We came to this fight to finish," Daala said sternly. "That is exactly what we will do, Captain."

"Please, Admiral," Fy'lyor lurched closer. For a short time, she'd felt some kinship with Daala, as she knew Daala had felt with her. Now, in the frenzy and desperation of battle, she had no idea how to touch that bond and bring Daala to some kind of sanity.

Daala held Fy'lyor's gaze for just a moment, and in that moment Fy'lyor felt a surge of hope. Then Daala said, "Captain, bring us around for another pass. And tell *Resolve* to send us its fighter screen before those bombers get more hits in."

Fy'lyor wanted to hit her, scream, cry, protest. Daala was going to get them all killed for nothing. She'd already disobeyed orders once, she could do it again.

But when she looked Daala in the eye, all her desperate bravery went away.

"Yes, Admiral," she managed to say.

Then she did as she was told.

"She's still coming around," Syal told Jag as they examined the tactical hologram. In her voice was a mix of awe and dread.

"One or two more runs from the bombers and she'll be helpless," Jagged shook his head.

"One more broadside and we'll be dead."

Jag glanced at Syal and scowled. His captain shrugged her shoulders, like there was nothing she could do, and truly and painfully, she was right.

The exchange with *Chimaera* had brought *Starless's* shields to the brink of collapse. The ugly battle of attrition was about to reach its climax, while beyond Trinity Fleet was getting torn to pieces by the rush of Yuuzhan Vong vessels. It was exactly the situation Jagged had hoped to avoid, and the brave effort of

the Sekotan pilots had amounted to only a minor delay of the inevitable slaughter.

"Sirs," a tactical officer called, "We're picking up incoming. Two squads of TIE interceptors."

Jag scowled. They'd be going for the bombers, surely, and sluggish B- and K-wings would be helpless against the nimble squints.

"Tell them to fall back to sector E-2," he said. "Recall Dagger Squadron to the same location. Have them meet up, then go on another attack run."

"They won't get here in time," Syal said quietly.

Jag looked out the front viewport and saw the tip of *Chimaera's* pale wedge swinging into view. Instead of moving into position to exchange broadsides once again, Daala seemed to be charging *Starless* head-on.

"Is she mad?" Jag gaped. "That's a collision course!"

Syal shouted, "Engines, dive now! Full evasive! All power to forward shields!"

Chimaera turned, straightened. The pale diamond of the destroyer settled directly ahead of *Starless*. For a moment Jag understood the chilling fear *Chimaera* must have instilled in countless rebels a generation ago. From this attack there would be no way out.

Syal had gone pale beside him. He fumbled for words, but could find nothing to answer the fiery death plunging toward them.

Then the tactical lieutenant shouted, "Sirs! New ships, coming out of hyperspace!"

"What? Who?" Syal gaped.

Jag's mind reeled. There were no more Trinity ships out there, no more of Daala's. They'd sent Zonama Sekot's location to the Alliance but they'd never arrive in time. The only, awful conclusion he could draw was more Yuuzhan Vong ships.

Then a deep voice, intimately familiar yet half-forgotten, boomed over the bridge's comm system. "All ships, this is *Blue Star* of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet, under the command of General Baron Soontir Fel. You are ordered to stand down immediately or we will intervene to stop hostilities."

"Sirs," the tactical lieutenant said, "We're getting... Over twenty ships. It's a whole *fleet*."

Jagged didn't remember staggering over to the tactical holo, but suddenly he was there, greeted with the sight of some two dozen blue markers on the outer rim of Zonama Sekot's gravity well and approaching fast.

His father's voice continued over the speaker, "We repeat, all vessels must stand down or we will *make* then stand down. If any ships request assistance, we will provide. If any vessels fire on us, they will be destroyed."

Because Jag couldn't find any words, Syal told the communications station, "Contact *Blue Star*. Tell them *Phoenix* and *Gem* are being overrun by boarding parties and need assistance."

"Commander," the tactical lieutenant suddenly appeared in front of Jag. "It's Daala. She's stopped her attack, but she isn't pulling away either."

He turned and looked at *Chimaera*'s gray diamond, hanging still and ominous in front of them. She was Daala. Of course she'd never surrender. The only question was how many she'd take with her before she went down.

"Contact.... my father's ship," Jag said. "Tell them to destroy *Chimaera*."

Boba Fett was a man who made layers of plans, one after another, in case his preferred ones failed. After the Chiss scientists tested and delivered an antidote for Lecersen's nanokiller, that first plan had been to take it straight home to Mandalore, then find Mirta. The members of the Skirata clan had objected, Jaing most vociferously. They had left five of their own behind on Zonama Sekot and did not want to abandon them there.

His second plan had been to take a copy of the vaccine with him to Mandalore, give the others to the Skiratas, and let the clan take care of themselves. He wasn't going to find his granddaughter on Zonama Sekot. He was about to do so when Dinua Jeban, of all people, cornered him and told him he should go with the Skiratas to Zonama Sekot. It would be a show of gratitude to the people who had fought beside him for

so long, and more, a show of unity that Mandalore would need when all of them came home to help build the new society that was taking shape there.

Fett had told her he didn't care about *Mando* unity and he didn't owe the Skiratas any debts. Then Dinua had pulled out her trump card. She offered to take a copy of the vaccine back into the known galaxy, find Mirta Ghev, and deliver it to her personally. Along with the vaccine, Mirta would hear about how her grandfather had fought bravely with his fellow *Mandos* to retrieve the vaccine not for himself, but so Mirta could return home to the husband and family she'd been exiled from.

He'd never explained his desire to Dinua, or the reasoning behind it. Apparently, he was easier to read than he thought, and that was a scary concept.

So in the end, Dinua Jeban, Ram Zerimar, and a few others had gone back to Mandalore with a copy of the antidote. Boba Fett joined the Skiratas and hitched a ride with the massive Chiss fleet that was rushing out to Zonama Sekot.

He'd hoped that Plan Number Three wouldn't involve jumping into a firefight, but a long life had taught Fett where hope usually got you.

When the Chiss flagship dropped out of hyperspace, a flight of clawcraft shot out of its main hangar, followed moments later by four *bes'uliike* and an armored assault shuttle packed with *Mando* warriors.

Fett was in the co-pilot's seat next to Baltan Carid, while the cargo compartment in the back was packed with Skiratas. Flanked by its bessie guards, the shuttle dove right into the messy fray. Fett was amazed to see so many different ships tumbling through space: Clawcraft, X-wings, E-wings, A-9s, TIEs, coralskippers.

It seemed like half the galaxy had converged on this one remote corner of space. The tiny speck of *Mando* in him was glad to add the *bes'uliike* to the collection.

Apparently Carid had the same thought. He chuckled and said, "Glad we didn't miss the party. I'd have felt left out."

"I just want to get this over with," Fett grunted. "Which ship are Venku's people on?"

"Just got a link from *Starless*. They say his shuttle landed on *Phoenix*. Can't believe that boat's still flying."

Fett could. The rest of the True Victory fleet seemed to have been destroyed, but he'd spent several days on Aref'ja's flagship and seen the devotion in the eyes of its crew, not to mention its captain. He wasn't going to under-estimate their fortitude.

"It's that one there, right?" Carid stabbed a finger at the pale wedge-shaped ship at four o'clock.

"Right. Take us in. See if you can hail them."

A squad of coralskippers dashed in front of them. Molten missiles exploded on their shields and nearly threw Fett out of his crash webbing. Carid stayed calm and plowed toward *Phoenix*, letting the bessies handle the fighters.

"Okay, I got it," Carid said. Apparently he had the ship's external communications wired into his helmet. "It's trouble. They say they've got *vongese* boarders trying to take the bridge."

"How do we get in? Main hangar's too far."

"They said it lost atmo anyway."

"So how do we get inside?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about *Nebula*-class destroyers. I'm used to jacking Impstars."

Fett growled inside his helmet. The shuttle was designed for forced entry, and if necessary they could do it the hard and sloppy way, but when you cut into the hull of a pressurized spaceship you never knew what you were going to find inside, or what vital systems you might tear through.

"Try calling *Phoenix* again. Ask them where the crab boys are."

Carid went silent. He was probably plugging a call in. *Phoenix* grew large in their viewport. He glanced at the shuttle's scanners and saw that the hull was still protected by particle shields, which would have to come down if they were going to board.

"Any time, Baltan."

"I got it, I got it," Carid said aloud. "They're on the top deck, trying to force their way into the bridge."

There wouldn't be any airlocks or docking hatches there. It looked like it was going to be hard and sloppy after all.

"Tell them to put down shields so we can get through," he said. "We'll burn through the hull."

Carid went silent again. He flew the shuttle along the top of the destroyer's hull, so close to the shield barrier a minor slip would turn them into a trail of fire and debris.

Then the shield winked out.

"Got it!" Carid cried. He plunged the ship downward then pulled up hard again, making Fett's gut lurch through his stomach. For a second the shuttle's nose skid across the destroyer's hull, sending up a spray of sparks that bounced off the front viewport. Then Carid kicked in the repulsors and leveled them out.

"Okay," he called back, "Gonna put down now! Get ready to blow through the hull! *Oya!*"

"*Oya!*" a bunch of the Skiratas cried. Like the patriotic *Mandos* they were, they relished any opportunity to blow things up.

Fett and Carid unbuckled their crash webbing and checked their equipment. Jet pack, flame-thrower, grapples, grenades, rocket launcher, Verpine rifle. Yes, Boba Fett was ready.

He hoped it was going to be his last fight in a long time. Maybe not forever, but a long time.

He was getting too old for this *osik*.

When he and Carid went into the cargo hold, the Skiratas had already opened the bottom bay doors, placed directional charges on the bare hull, and closed the door again. Fett joined the others in grabbing hold of the support cables that stretched across the ceiling on the edges of the chamber. When he had one secure in each hand, Mird Skirata set off the explosives that rocked the shuttle.

"Okay," Fett said, "Open the doors!"

Jaing punched the control panel on the wall and the doors in the floor slid open again. There was a rush of air as the shuttle adjusted to the air pressure inside *Phoenix*. Through the open doors, Fett would see the white floor-panels of a hallway littered with black debris.

"Okay, we're in!" He called. He wasn't good at giving motivational speeches, and for a second he stalled on what to say. Then he fell back on tradition and shouted, "*Oya Mando!*"

"*Oya Mando!*" his troops echoed, and the first ones dropped into the hallway below.

"Good enough," Carid said as he slung his Verpine rifle over the purple armor of his shoulder and switched to a pair of hand-held Czerkas.

"You can't aim like that," Fett grunted. Going two-guns-in-hand was something kids used to look like they had hard *shebs*. Carid should have known better.

"Come on, *Bob'ika*, when have I let you down?"

Then he dropped into the hallway.

Fett restrained a sigh and followed. As he fell he fired the pulse on his jetpack to keep from hitting the deck with too much force; artificial gravity was unpredictable and he was not in the mood for these for *shabla* risks.

The other Mandos were already charging ahead down the corridor to the sound of blaster-fire. Even ancient Jaing was keeping good pace, which encouraged Fett to hurry up. He kept his rifle clutched to his chest and ran at a clipped pace, fast but not enough to tire him out. When he turned the corner he saw a group of Skiratas bunched up in front of a closed door.

As he came up behind them he said, "You don't need to slice the code. Just *blast* it."

Mird held up a hand. "There's someone on the other side."

Jaing had his helmet pressed against the door. The others waited in expectant silence until he pulled his head back and said, "Crab boys. They're talking about something."

Fett felt the deck vibrate slightly and heard the clank of moving feet. "Sounds like they're on the move."

"Let's break through and surprise 'em," Carid said, "Got charges?"

"Coming right up." Mird took out a handful of magnetic explosives from his belt and began placing them on the edges of the door. The others, Fett included, backed all the way around the corner.

A second after Mird ran to join them, the charges went off, shaking the whole corridor and sending out a cloud of black smoke.

"Well, so much for surprise," Carid grunted.

"Come on," Fett said. "*Oya!*"

"Oya!" the others echoed.

Fett switched his visor to infra-red and charged into the black smoke at the head of the group. They burst through the wrecked door-frame and began firing at the Yuuzhan Vong down the hall. The Vong hurled their own thud bugs. Fett ducked to avoid a hail of them, but they caught one of the Skiratas in the chest and knocked him down.

"Come on!" Mird shouted. "Keep going!"

The Vong held their ground. Some dropped to their knees so others could throw over their heads, and soon the cramped corridor was full of laser blasts and arcing thud bugs. Through Fett's infrared visor, it looked like a hailstorm of red-orange against a backdrop of violet-blue. The effect was dizzying, but he was too busy killing and trying not to die to change it.

Then something else appeared: a fan of bright light, moving in a swift circular arc. Then another appeared, and another, and the arcs of light danced through the blizzard, dropping bodies as they went.

Through the chaos of footsteps and shouts and laser-blasts he heard the distinctive hum of lightsabers.

Fett switched to basic visual. The last few Vong were falling, brought down by a combination of *Mando* laserfire and sweeping lightsabers. A tall blonde woman was holding one, while the other two were grasped by a Mandalorian in mismatched armor plating.

"Great," Carid said, "Two *shabla* Jedi."

"I'm not a Jedi!" Venku and Blondie said in unison.

"*Kad'ika*!" Jaing Skirata cried. The old clone pushed through the front of the crowd and enveloped Venku in an awkward, armor-clanking hug.

As he pulled away, Jaing asked, "Where's *Bard'ika*, and *Mer'ika*, and-"

"They're down the hall. Most of them, I'll explain later."

"Was that the last of them?" Fett asked, "Or are there more crab boys around?"

He couldn't see Venku's face, but he knew the man was shocked to see him there.

"Well?" Fett pressed. He had a job to do and no time to spare.

"They've blocked off the bridge," Blondie spoke up. "They're trying to get through the blast doors."

"Good thing we showed up to save your butts," Boba Fett said. "Let's go finish this job."

When the blast doors exploded, the guards standing nearest to it were literally thrown across the bridge. One of them was tossed into the crew pit while the other smashed into the far wall with a painful crunch.

Miranda barely noticed. She threw herself into her Frozian lieutenant and the lieutenant fell into the nearest bulkhead as smoke poured onto the bridge. Yuuzhan Vong warriors charged through the smoke, not hurling thud bugs but instead swinging their amphistaffs. They cut down two more guards and charged down the bridge's center aisle toward Admiral Kre'fey, who stood in front of the forward viewport as lasers flashed and ships exploded beyond his back.

Miranda stared in awe as the old Bothan faced down his enemy. The lead Yuuzhan Vong warrior had a heavy claw in place of a right arm and his entire face was a stomach-churning mess of scars. He was the first of the monsters Miranda had ever seen with her own eyes, and they were even more hideous than she remembered from old holo-recordings.

Kre'fey tilted his head back so his violet eyes looked downward at the warrior with disdain. "The battle is finished. A new fleet has arrived and is decimating yours. Surrender."

The Yuuzhan Vong snarled and flung a hand forward. His amphistaff snapped out like a whip and grabbed Kre'fey by the neck. The Bothan gurgled and sunk to his knees.

The warrior stepped closer, until he was the one looked down on the gasping, helpless old admiral. Kre'fey opened his jaw to say something, but he could muster no sound except a choked rasp.

Then there was a flash of blue light, and the warrior's head rolled off his shoulders.

Miranda stood with Ben Skywalker's lightsaber in her hands. She stared at the decapitated corpse with wide eyes. Her limbs wouldn't move. Her entire body was frozen in shock at what she'd done.

So, apparently, was every other body on the bridge.

Finally, one of the warriors mustered enough wits to raise his own staff and charge at Miranda. She spun on her heel to face him and held the lightsaber up. The warrior batted it aside with his amphistaff, nearly tearing it out of her hands and sending her spinning halfway around. The warrior raised the staff again for a second strike-

-and a hail of laserblasts shot across the bridge and knocked him to the ground. Miranda heard the clatter of feet and saw a swarm of heavily-armored figures emerging from the smoke. The other Yuuzhan Vong on the bridge rushed to intercept them, but they were greeted not just by laser-blasts, but by the flashing arcs of three more lightsabers.

The wounded Vong at her feet stirred and began crawling toward Kre'fey's gasping form despite the four scorch-marks on its chest. Miranda turned and thrust the tip of her lightsaber through its skull. Then, finally, it was still.

She looked up and saw that the other Yuuzhan Vong on the bridge were dead. The smoke was clearing as she saw a tall blonde woman holding one of the lightsabers, while the other two were, impossibly, held by a Mandalorian with patchwork armor plating.

"Bridge is secure!" A tall, broad commando in purple armor announced. He stuffed two Czerka blasters into hip-holsters and looked around the smoking scene.

"Very good."

A man in battered red-and-green armor marched down the center aisle toward Miranda and Kre'fey. If it wasn't so impossible, she would have thought it was Boba Fett himself.

Miranda held up Skywalker's lightsaber, knowing full well she couldn't stop this man if he really wanted to get past her.

"Got another feisty one, *Mand'alar*," said the one with two lightsabers.

"Don't worry," rasped the one who must have been Boba Fett. "We're here to defend the ship. Is the admiral okay?"

"I am fine," Kre'fey coughed and tried to stand. Miranda offered her arm, and he leaned on her as he got to his feet.

Fett gave Kre'fey an up-down look and said, "Well, seems like it's mission accomplished."

“I don't believe it,” The one in purple armor said to Miranda. “You're not *another* wanna-be Jedi, are you?”

Miranda looked at the smooth cylinder in her hand, sighed, and said, “It's a really long story.”

Chapter 36

Light flashed and strobed through the shadows, the drifting smoke, the rain of black ash: green, red, blue, green again. Thrusting, deflecting, parrying, swirling through the air. The battle's fourth combatant rumbled beneath their feet, and threatened at any moment to buck all three of them (Jedi, Sith, and something else) into the black clouds that billowed overhead.

Jaina knew that, somehow, Darth Krayt was reaching into the very heart of the island and stirring the molten volcanic energies within. She was astonished by the power of it, and even more she was terrified. This half-human monstrosity that had once been A'Sharad Hett seemed not merely to *use* the Dark Side of the Force; he was part of it, and it was part of him, and they gushed forward together like a great unstoppable torrent.

In all her years as the Sword of the Jedi, she had never fought an opponent like this: not Tsavong Long, not Onimi, not even her own brother.

But because she was the Sword, she had to fight.

This time, at least, Jacen was fighting at her side.

When the battle began, Jacen had been hiding his presence in the Force. Now he blazed in it. Through her twin bond, she felt it all the more. She felt his determination, his anger, his bitter hope. Together, they dashed across the great slope of red lava and black rock, danced through the rain of black ash, and battled the Dark Lord of the Sith as two minds with one heart.

And yet, even as they fought, she knew it would not be enough.

Sometimes their weapons would break past the twin green lightsabers that Krayt wielded, but each time their red or blue blades would just skirt across the Sith's Lord's armor, leaving only faint scratches and wisps of smoke, quickly dispersed. Krayt never stopped moving, and never seemed to tire. Jaina had to draw on all the Force energy she could not to lose her breath.

"Your attacks are pointless," Krayt told them, not a pant in his voice. "If you want *true* strength, I can give it to you."

"No thanks," Jacen grunted as he caught a blow from Krayt. "I've tried that trick once. It was enough."

Krayt stepped away from them. Jaina didn't dare think he was getting tired, but she needed any opportunity to catch her breath.

"You were a fool, do you know that? A failure." Krayt snarled at Jacen. "Vergere and Lumiya must be so disappointed in you, Caedus. They trained you, molded you, died for you, and what did you give them in return? A rabid nek dog calling himself a Sith, who did nothing but wreak chaos until his own sister put him down like the animal he was. You, *Darth Caedus*, are everything I have told my One Sith not to be."

Jacen didn't rise to the bait, but Jaina could feel his frustration through their twin bond. No, not just frustration, but guilt. He knew that everything Krayt said was true, and hated himself for it.

"You're not the first guy with gold eyes and delusions of grandeur," Jaina said. "I could tell you stories."

"You pour scorn on *me*, Sword of the Jedi?" Krayt barked a laugh. "You're even worse than your brother! If Caedus is a mad dog, you are a trained attack animal, biting whoever your owner tells you! Your tricks are worse than his."

"Well, I came back from the dead," Jacen said. "At least my tricks are original."

"You're a cheap shadow of your grandfather," Krayt said. Jaina could feel something beneath his angry bluster (Doubt? Curiosity? Fear?) but he pressed, "I *knew* Anakin Skywalker. Do you realize that? I called him friend."

That took Jaina by surprise, and Jacen too. She had guessed that Krayt was old, his life prolonged by the Yuuzhan Vong

armor on his body and the Force, but she had never imagined he'd known Darth Vader.

"Your grandfather was a fool," Krayt pointed the tip of a lightsaber at Jacen. "He had no vision, only rage, so he enslaved himself to Darth Sidious and got nothing in return. Yet even *he* was a greater Sith than you."

Jacen gave an over-dramatic sigh. "Ever since I came back I've been hearing about what a failure I am. Can we get on with it, please?"

"Gladly," Krayt said, and leaped at him.

Jaina sprinted to her brother's side as Krayt rained down blows with both lightsabers. Jacen held his up to deflect, but the sheer force of Krayt's blows forced the red blade back into his face. For a second it skimmed Jacen's chin, drawing a tiny black scorch-line across his skin. The next blow forced his sword back further, and red light dipped into Jacen's right shoulder.

Jacen fell back, shock and pain in his eyes. One hand flew up to grab his throat as the Dark Lord attempted to twist and crush his windpipe with the Force.

Jaina swept in on Krayt's side. The Sith threw Jacen further with a shove of Force energy and turned both his blades on Jaina. Now she, too, found herself trapped on the defensive, vainly trying to keep her strength up as Krayt's green blades smashed her own closer and closer to her body. The Sith's eyes, blue and red, blazed alike with determination. He would wear her down until he killed her with her own weapon.

Then a voice said in her ear, *Let's teach him what a fool can do*. It was the voice of the man who had spoken to her and Jacen the night before.

A sensation took hold of her, a *knowledge*. She let her knees collapse under her. She arched her body, tilted her head back as far as it would go. Green blades blazed over her head as Krayt hunched forward to reach her. She lowered Jusik's saber, spun it around, and swiped at the ground beneath Krayt's feet. Blue light cut through black rock, and red lava immediately welled through the broad slash in the stone.

Krayt stumbled, tried to step back. Jaina kept her blue blade spinning in a skyward arc. It crashed against the interior of

Krayt's left forearm, hissed and sparked against his Yuuzhan Vong armor, then skipped up to his wrist and stabbed into his palm, forcing his hand open.

Krayt howled in pain as the weapon sparked, fell from his hand, and tumbled down the slope. He stepped back further and Jaina hopped to her feet to avoid the scalding flow of lava now seeping up to form a glowing red line between her and the Sith Lord.

Krayt held his wounded hand against his chest, but the other still clutched a green lightsaber. His eyes were bright with fury.

Jacen appeared beside her, holding his red blade in front of him, and said, "Nice job."

"Thanks," she said. "Old family trick."

Suddenly, the match seemed closer to even.

The lightsaber in his hand was older even than he. It had fought in many battles under many suns. It had slain Hutt mercenaries, diced Trade Federation war droids into smoking wreckage, smoked across Yuuzhan Vong battle armor, and sparkled against the blue blades of Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi and the red one of Darth Vader.

Darth Krayt holds his father's blade in front of him and reaches out with the Force.

He touched the heart of the island again and churned the fire within. He would tear this whole island apart if what was what it took. He would burn Ben Skywalker in its flames, cut Jaina Solo's head from her shoulders, and force Darth Caedus to reveal the secrets behind his resurrection.

The earth buckled, throwing Skywalker's grandchildren off-balance. More lava rose from the cracks in the obsidian plane and when the wind blew it carried black ash into his eyes. He blinked the debris away and reached deeper, urging the planet itself to surge up and-

Enough.

And suddenly, the black slope stopped shaking. The lava stopped rising, and the molten heart of the island ceased to churn.

Enough.

"A'Sharad, that's enough," a voice said calmly behind him.

He turns to see an old man in Jedi robes standing with his arms crossed over his chest. He has a white beard on his face and blue eyes dark with disapproval, but a sad smile on his lips.

He recognized those eyes, and that smile. He'd seen it before, and it haunted his dreams. Never in his life had he felt more defeated and helpless, not when he lost Syne at Sarillion, not when Vergere and the Vong trapped him in their Embrace of Pain.

He crumples forward onto Tatooine's hot sands, clutching the severed stump of his arm, while Kenobi looks down on him with scorn and pity.

Anger surged within him. "Not you! Not again!"

Kenobi held out both hands. "Sekot will not do your fighting for you, Master Hett. It will not follow you into the dark, no matter how hard you try."

"Then I will conquer without this damned world," he snarled. "If it does not serve me, it will burn, just like everything else."

Kenobi shook his head sadly. "Oh, Master Hett. You've lived so long and you are still a child."

He screams in rage. He swings his father's blade right through Kenobi's form, and the old man's ghost dissolves into nothing.

The force of his charge sent him stumbled across smooth rock. When he finally came to a stop he found himself at the edge of a great cliff. Black rock suddenly dropped a hundred meters into a massive forest. Radiant multi-colored trees stretched out across the curve of the island, and beyond them, ocean water twinkled in the sunshine.

Overhead, the swirling black smoke begins to clear. The sun shines down on Skywalker's grandchildren as they charge.

Darth Krayt threw himself into his rage. He had come so far, fought so hard, survived for so long. He could not allow himself to be destroyed now, not by old ghosts and Skywalker's brats.

Caedus struck first. He deflected the red blade and blocked Jaina's with a raised forearm. As her saber hissed and sparked against his armor he twisted his arm, forcing her blade to spin downward. He grabbed her forearm and gave it a sharp twist.

The woman howled as her bones snapped. He pulled her in close enough to thrust his elbow into her face, cracking her cheekbone. He threw her back with the Force and she sprawled across the black rock, her lightsaber tumbling from her grip.

“Jaina!” Caedus shouted.

Krayt shifted his face him and gripped his father's lightsaber with both hands. He swung again and again, forcing Caedus back. The man's eyes blazed in anger and frustration but every time he attempted an attack of his own Krayt would carelessly bat it aside.

Finally, Caedus attempts a savage forward thrust. He swings his lightsaber upward, sending Caedus and both his arms with it. A downward flick of the wrist shears the mouth off Caedus's lightsaber. Its red light winks out and a bouquet of sparks flowers around Caedus's hands. The man jumps back, howling in pain as he throws away the flaming debris.

Then Caedus slipped at the edge of the cliff. He straightened his body and pulled on the Force to keep from tipping over into the vast forest below.

Krayt used the Force too and held him tight at the edge. Shock and fear filled Caedus's eyes as Krayt took two steps closer. His father's lightsaber buzzed at his side and he reached out with his other hand as though to reel Caedus in. He pulled on Caedus through the Force, but the man summoned his own power and resisted.

“Now,” he snarled, “You will show me what I need to know. And I will show you the *true* power of the Sith.”

And then he stretched out, not just with the force of strength but with his mind. He touched the soul of Anakin Skywalker's grandson-

*-and for a second and an eternity their minds are one-
-lightsabers whirl and flash, green, red, blue, and green again-*

-Vergere stares at him with a touch of sympathy in her alien eyes and he tries to keep the white from overwhelming him-

-Jaina lunges forward and red fury overwhelms him; fury at Jaina, fury at the Jedi, fury at everyone for trying to ruin his efforts when all he wants is to bring order to the galaxy-

-he looks down at the small child writhing in her mother's arms, speechless with awe at the life he's created, the life he'll give anything to protect, until finally he manages to shift his eyes up to meet those of the woman who changed his life forever-

-he cradles a battered lightsaber in both hands and wonders whether he can ever live up to the example of the man who used it; when he thumbs the trigger an emerald-green blade stabs upward toward twin suns high in the sky-

-he looks out across the endless black and endless stars of a desert at nighttime, feels the sand beneath his feet and the lightsabers in his hands, and wonders if here and now, finally, he should bury his weapons, lay it all down, and walk away from his past-

-Kenobi stands over him as he crouches in the hot Tatooine sand, clutching the cauterized stump of his arm, and he has never felt more helpless, never will feel more helpless, and that helplessness will grow to become the root of all his rage-

That was when he understood.

As the dragon pried into his mind with invisible claws, Jacen knew he couldn't win. All his years of studying esoteric Force techniques, all his endless seeking of knowledge, even his tutelage to the Sith that he thought, in his arrogance, would solve all the galaxy's problems: none of this prepared him for the ancient strength and unbreakable will of the man who'd been A'Sharad Hett.

Darth Krayt would tear his mind apart from the inside out. He would discover the secret of how Jacen had been returned to life, and when that was done (whether it would help Krayt or not) the Dark Lord would kill him again, because neither Jacen Solo nor Darth Caedus had ever possessed the power to stop the Dark Man. Only his arrogance and desperate need to be special had impelled him to sacrifice all those people to stop the dragon. Certainly, it had not been the Force telling him to ruin his his life, and the lives of so many others, for nothing.

The claws of the dragon stabbed deep into his mind and they pull-

-he looks into Tenel Ka's gray eyes and they are happy and sad at once and he cannot remember if they have ever been

anything else, and when he looks down at the child in her arms he can feel the joy and the pain stabbing into his heart and he knows the pain will only grow stronger-

-Vergere stares at him with a touch of sympathy in her alien eyes and he tries to keep the white from overwhelming him-

-he looks in horror at Nelani's lifeless gaze that will not leave his own, will not stop accusing him, and in his heart he would do anything to turn back time just a second and pull the saber from her chest but he knows he cannot undo time and cannot escape his destiny-

-his sister lunges forward and red fury overwhelms him; fury at Jaina, fury at the Jedi, fury at everyone for trying to ruin his efforts when all he wants is to bring order to the galaxy-

-he lays in the clearing surrounded by birds and feels warm sunlight on his face, and behind him he can hear Jaina and Anakin burst through the brush-

-freezing wind carries drifts of snow across the floor of the cave as he clutches his arms to his body and shivers, and slowly he raises his head to see two figures wrapped in thermosuits staring down at him in awe and dread-

And Krayt clawed into his mind he clawed into Krayt's and for a moment and forever he was the Dark Lord.

He was the Dark Lord, and it was very familiar, and very sad.

They had seen so much horror and so much loss. They had come of age in a galaxy wracked by war and chaos, seen their idols fail, and had sought desperately for a new path. They had dared forbidden love and known the urgent need to protect that only a father could. They had been transformed by Vergere and the Yuuzhan Vong but in the end they had been the creations of themselves and no one else: Trusting no one, believing nothing, desperate for control over the chaos of the universe, willing to perform any horror until they'd beaten the universe into submission.

Pride, so much pride.

Fear and rage most of all.

And yet for Jacen there had been much more: the warm touch of Jaina's constant twin bond, Anakin's rolling eyes, Chewbacca's roaring laughter, his father's slanted grin, his mother's proud smile, his uncle's warm wisdom, his aunt's cool

knowledge, Ben's boyish admiration, all the friends who'd loved and trusted him.

Tenel Ka.

Allana.

When he sought these things in Krayt, he found nothing except a void.

No warmth, no hope, no joy.

-just a scared young man who'd been helpless as his father had been struck down, sitting beneath a rock and watching the twin suns set over an endless desert, hoping that if he becomes a Jedi he will never be scared or helpless ever again-

The Dark Man had dominated his life for so long that he never expected to find himself feeling what he did now: not fear or rage or repulsion or hate but sympathy, and a deep and somber pity.

So as he touched Krayt and Krayt touched him he tried to share everything that had been missing in the life of a young orphan from Tatooine:

-the featureless white-out of agony, the red tide of rage, the black hole of despair, the gamma-sleet of loss; and the lush verdure of growing things, the grays of stone and duracrete, the glimmer of gemstones and transparisteel, the blue-white sizzle of a noonday sun and its exact echo in a lightsaber's blade-

-he shares how much he loves it all: for all these things are one thing: pain and joy, loss and reunion, life and death-

-because he is Krayt and Krayt is him and each is everything else, and Jacen has learned that you can meet the universe and all its irrational pain- which means meeting one's self- with fear, or hatred, or despair-

-or one can meet it with love-

It was a lesson he had learned a long time ago. He should never have forgotten it.

And yet he knew, even as Krayt touched his mind and he touched Krayt's, that love was not enough. His love was met with rage and fear, the only things the orphan from Tatooine knew.

Nothing he could do was enough, and he despaired.

-and he is in a starship and his body is dead but his soul ever-restless struggles to heal his broken flesh, and with time it will

succeed and when that happens the whole galaxy will be his to command-

And then Jacen was in space, watching a ship's ion efflux as it plunged toward the bright flames of a star.

He is adrift among nothing, a consciousness but no body, like the times he'd mind-walked and flow-walked, but different entirely. He watches the ship with Krayt's body disappear into the sun's glare and knows, finally, after decades or centuries, it is finally over. A great weight lifts from his chest, a weight that has been crushing him ever since his vision in the Pool of Knowledge so long ago.

Then he sees the man beside him. He is in a vacuum suit, without tether or chord, floating free among the stars. He can see his face and it is a face he knows, a face he first saw in that blasted vision of the Throne of Balance. Every time he has seen this man in his dreams his lips were set in a scowl and his eyes were smoldering with rage.

Now, it was different. His eyes were soft and moist, his mouth a somber line.

And somehow the last Skywalker's thoughts touched his:

Just you and me... walking in the sky.

And he understood, finally, at long last. He could not defeat the Dark Man here and now, on Zonama Sekot, but he would be defeated all the same. Jacen might not be able to strike the final blow, but he could make sure his final vision would come to pass. All it required was the thing it had been so hard for him to give:

Trust.

The claws left his mind.

The warm wind of Zonama Sekot brushed his face, and bright sunlight filled his eyes. He felt Krayt, rage and fear, and behind him Jaina rose to her feet, lightsaber blazing in her hand and determination pulsing in the Force.

He felt life all around him, every bit of it: the distant unknowable mind of Zonama Sekot, the growing boras in the forest below, the birds in the sky, the moss under stone, microbes in the ocean, seaweed clinging to wet rock.

The alien armor that strengthened and imprisoned an orphan boy from Tatooine.

He knew what he had to do.

He reached out through his twin bond, and sent Jaina one warm and simple touch.

Then he surrendered.

He was pulled instantly into Darth Krayt's embrace. The Dark Lord enfolded him massive arms, and the rough spikes of his Vonduun Crab armor stabbed into his sides.

Jacen barely noticed.

As Krayt embraced him (more than embraced, squeezed him hard enough to crack ribs and pop his organs, literally crushed the life from him) Jacen pressed the bare skin of his hands against the Dark Lord's armor. He found within him-self the neural network implanted by the slave seed that had been so crucial when he had been captured and remade, as crucial as Krayt's armor was to him.

The Yuuzhan Vong part of him spoke to the Yuuzhan Vong part of Krayt, and it said a simple thing:

Let go.

Krayt let out a cry of pain as his armor began to tear itself from his body. Every plate, from arms and legs to shoulder and torso, obeyed the command Jacen sent it. Each piece tried to tear itself from the human flesh it had spent decades growing into.

Rather than release Jacen as the agony overtook him, Krayt crushed him tighter. He knew that Jacen had caused his body to turn on him and the only way to end this betrayal was the kill the source of treason. Jacen felt the hot stab of a lightsaber blade running through his gut, and white pain threatened to overwhelm him. His mind and body weakened, and he felt his arms and ribs crack from Krayt's embrace.

Then Jaina came up from behind and thrust her blade into the gaps of the Darth Krayt's peeling armor.

She stabbed deep, pulled out, stabbed again, and fished her burning blade back and forth inside the old man's guts.

Finally, Krayt's arms fell to his sides. His lightsaber's green blade shuddered off, but its old silver cylinder remained pressed between two falling bodies.

For a moment Krayt's body collapsed into Jacen's and Jacen's fell into Krayt's, and each remained standing only by the dead

weight of the other. Then there was a gust of wind, and a chattering flock of birds rushed past, trailing rainbow tails as they rushed past the cliff's edge and soared over the verdant forest. As they passed they spoke in Jacen's mind with the voice of a planet:

Well done, they said.

And: *Rest*.

Jacen's body fell backward. Krayt's tipped forward and followed. Together, they tumbled over the edge, into the trees below.

Jaina might have cried for him, he didn't know.

All he heard was the rush of wind over his ears. All he saw was a shimmering rainbow slicing through the sky.

Chapter 37

The deck shook beneath her feet again, and blood spilled into her eyes. There was a flash of light and heat and she was sure that would be the last time, and that everything after would be the cold black nothing of death. But then heat and light passed, and she wiped the blood from her eyes and steadied her feet.

Fy'lyor looked around the bridge. Klaxons blared. People cried in pain and panic. Outside the viewport, the space was a light show of countless laser blasts, proton torpedoes, and volcanic Yuuzhan Vong missiles. And Admiral Daala was standing up near the front transparisteel frame, like she was transfixed by the deadly beauty of the scene in front of her.

There was no defeating the overwhelming number of Chiss vessels. Sleek black star destroyers, frigates, escort pickets, assault shuttles, and starfighters had all thrown themselves into the fray with terrifying eagerness, and they dealt destruction with horrible efficiency. *Repulse* had already surrendered. *Resolve* was being overwhelmed. *Starless* and the other Trinity ships had limped away from the main battle zone as quickly as they could so that their new Chiss allies would make an end of it.

As for the Yuuzhan Vong, half the fleet had charged ahead to meet fiery death, while the other half seemed to linger reluctantly in Zonama Sekot's lower orbit. Whatever that meant, Fy'lyor didn't know and didn't care. All she cared about now was the Chiss cruiser behind her, pounding them with wave after wave of turbolaser fire, and the big Yuuzhan Vong ships looming in front of them.

Fy'lyor staggered over to the communications station. She felt dizzy from blood loss and all the smoke in the air, but she managed to cling to the back of the lieutenant's chair.

She leaned in and told the woman, "Send out a beacon, no encryption. Tell them we surrender. Tell *everyone* we surrender."

"*What?*" Daala thundered, whirling away from the front viewport and stalking toward Fy'lyor.

"Admiral, please," Fy'lyor protested. "We have to surrender! It's the only thing left!"

"No!" Daala spat. "I did not come here to lay down arms, not to Jagged Fel, not to his traitor father."

"It's surrender or die, Admiral!"

Daala drew herself straight and said, "Then we'll die."

Fy'lyor knew it would come to this. She should have known from the start, should have never joined Daala, should have gone back to Trinity Fleet with Jaina Solo and never looked back.

She'd been a fool, but she'd helped stop the bio-weapon attack and save an entire planet. She could be proud of that.

She could be proud of this too.

Fy'lyor pulled her service pistol from the holster at her hip and said, "Admiral Daala, I am relieving you of command."

For moment she looked shocked. Then she looked hurt, confused, afraid. Against herself Fy'lyor felt a pang of sympathy for this fierce, lost old woman.

The deck rocked again. Fy'lyor lost her footing and fell against the nearest bulkhead. Suddenly, she was staring at the tip of a pistol in Daala's hand.

Her body froze in fear but she managed to say, "Admiral, please, I—"

One more flash. Light, heat, then cold black nothing.

The bridge rocked again under another turbolaser volley from the Chiss vessel behind them. Natasi Daala stood over Fy'lyor's body, staring at the dark blaster-scorched mess of her face.

Attachment, she thought dimly. It all came down to attachment.

She generally did not like people. She'd accepted that a long time ago. But there were some people, a select few, that she'd found worthy of her concern. People she'd loved, like Tarkin and Liegeus. People she'd trusted and respected, like Pellaeon and Dorvan. And people she'd sensed an ineffable common bond with, people with whom she could share some of the loneliness she felt fighting the universe every single day.

They all caused her pain in the end, but that last group was the worst because she always placed fragile hope in their hands. Boba Fett had turned on her. So had Fy'lyor in the end. And, looking back, she realized that she should have never trusted them in the first place. But, aching for a kindred spirit, she had let them close to her, let down her guard, and allowed them to betray her.

Enough. Enough of everything.

She turned away from Fy'lyor's body at last. The communications lieutenant stared at her with wide, terrified eyes.

Daala took a deep breath, carefully tucked her hold-out blaster into her belt, and said, "Belay that order, lieutenant."

The woman nodded dumbly.

Daala walked over to the crew pit and bent low next to the helmsman's station. One crewman was sopping up blood from a head wound, and another was cradling a broken arm, but the others looked operable, albeit scraped and bruised.

"Lay course dead ahead," she said. "Maximum speed."

The helm crew stared up at her, as stupid and speechless and the comm officer. She barked, "Do it! Do it now!"

That got them moving. Like whipped animals they started hurrying around to please their master. Daala sighed and rose to full height. Little people were always so... predictable. She felt sorry for them.

She turned to face the forward viewport. The Yuuzhan Vong ship was still ahead of them and growing closer. She wasn't certain, but she thought it might be their flagship. It was the biggest in the fleet, and the others seemed to be trying to protect it, though that hadn't stopped the Chiss from taking out half of its dovin basals. Now the massive vessel smoldered before her, a helpless waiting target.

She would have preferred to take her revenge on Jagged Fel, but striking one last blow against the Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't be so bad either. Better than getting poisoned by Moff's, shot by in your quarters by a Sith witch, or blown up by some hick Jedi.

She'd always hoped to die as she'd lived: one the bridge of a ship, on her feet, with her boots on.

"All non-essential crew, head for the escape pods," she called. "Abandon ship. Helm, stay behind. Prepare for ramming speed."

She didn't even look behind her to make sure they obeyed. She watched as the Yuuzhan Vong ship loomed ever-closer. More explosions chewed at *Chimaera's* hull, and another lurch threw her suddenly forward. She braced herself against the forward viewport, pressing both palms flat against the cool transparisteel.

She stared at the Vong ship as it grew closer and closer. It brought its weapons to bear, firing volcanic death at her, but nothing could stop her. Debris slammed into the viewport, and hairline cracks slithered through the transparisteel, tickling her palm, but she didn't let go. She leaned in closer. She saw the prow of her vessel stab into the heart of the Vong ship, shearing away yorik coral and steel in equal measure. *Chimaera* groaned, buckled again, but it stabbed deeper and deeper into the enemy craft.

She realized, then, that she had seen this before. She had dreamed this moment, over and over again throughout her life. She rarely remembered specifics, save the desperate violence that mirrored so much of her waking life. But it had been this specific moment that had haunted her dreams. She was as certain of that as anything.

She didn't understand how that could have been.

Unless, somehow, that mysterious, elusive thing called the Force had been reaching out to her all along.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks and her mouth opened in soundless heaving gasps.

Then the hairline fractures snapped and cracked under her hands. The viewport shattered, opening the bridge to fire and

space. Daala was swept off her feet, plunging even faster than her dying vessel, closer and closer to the Vong ship, into its beautiful blossom of flame.

Starless had retreated to the edge of the battle zone, but from its bridge Syal had an excellent view of Admiral Daala's funeral pyre. *Chimaera's* small gray wedge plunged into the Yuuzhan Vong flagship like a dagger. Flame surged up from their collision point, consuming them both. For a second the flare grew so bright that Syal had to look away. Then the light was gone, and so was the legendary star destroyer.

"It's over," she said, once to herself, then louder so Jagged Fel could hear.

The man blinked, like she'd snuck up on him even though they'd been standing side-by-side. He'd acted like he was in a daze ever since the arrival of his father and the Chiss fleet, which was a little strange to Syal, as she was barely able to contain the energy coursing through her body, equal parts adrenaline, joy, and relief after having stared down death just minutes ago.

"It's not over yet." The words scraped out of Jag's throat.

"*Chimaera* is gone. So is the Vong flagship" Syal insisted. "All the other Imperial ships have either been destroyed or surrendered."

"Those Vong will fight to the death. They always do. I fought them before. I know."

It was a sobering thought. Almost half of their fleet had been destroyed, and with the arrival of the Chiss forces they were well outnumbered, but if they wanted to go down fighting they could take a lot of lives with them.

"Maybe not this time," she said.

Jag looked frustrated. "Captain, you don't understand, I *know* the Vong."

"You *knew* them," she corrected. "It's been fifteen years. A lot can change."

He snorted and shook his head. "Not the Vong."

She pressed, "If they can't change, then everything you that happened in that war, all the death and suffering, everything you fought for, everything my parents fought for, all of that

meant nothing. I don't believe that, Jag. I don't believe it was all for nothing."

He gave her a suspicious look. "Captain, how did *you* become an optimist?"

Syal thought she had a clue, but she said, "Beats me. But I'm banking on another miracle."

As she sat in the communications daumutek, listening breathlessly to a constant stream of chatter and reports from the battle in Zonama Sekot's orbit, it occurred to Danni Quee that she had been here before.

When battle had last come to the planet she called home, it had been fifteen years ago. Then, as now, she hadn't been taking part in the fight herself. Rather, she'd remained on the planet's surface to watch the battle play out. She didn't want to fight exactly, and wouldn't know how if she tried, but she hated the feelings of helplessness and, worse, uselessness. People she cared about were dying while she remained behind, impotent, waiting for someone else to save her.

Just as before, she felt frustrated with herself. For so much of her life she'd existed on the periphery of things. As a scientist, she'd ended up on the outer fringes of space, staring into the extragalactic void. As a Force-user, she'd been an ally and helper to the Jedi, but had never taken steps to become one herself. On Zonama Sekot, she had been Magister Jabitha's assistant until tragedy had forced authority on her shoulders.

For a while that had made her feel good and useful, but now, listening to the fight and watching the readouts, she'd come to realize how peripheral she was once again.

She and Harrar had sat in the communications daumutek through it all: the arrival of the True Honor fleet, its stand-off with Trinity, the arrival of Admiral Daala and the attempt to poison Zonama Sekot with what she could only believe was Alpha Red. And then came the frenzied battle, where ship after ship had been wrecked or destroyed. And then the climax came in the form of a Chiss fleet bristling for a fight. Once Daala's ships were destroyed or subdued, Baron Fel's ships began attacking True Honor, and True Honor, in the fashion typical of fanatic Yuuzhan Vong warriors, was ready to fight to the death.

Through viewscreen, via hyperlink and villip, Danni and Harrar watched and heard True Honor die. The hyperlink relayed the talk between Trinity and Chiss vessels; the coordinated tactics, the barked orders, the stray chatter, all of which was building to a victorious, confident crescendo.

The villips told another story. They spoke with the voice of True Honor, the Yuuzhan Vong whom Danni had failed to fully welcome into the new society they were making on Zonama Sekot. She heard equal parts bravery, desperation, anger, and despair as different ships scrambled to fight and survive without guidance from their flagship. It was, all in all, a pathetic end to True Honor.

Harrar had told her not to blame herself, that the warriors had made their own decisions, but she never entirely believed it. She was Magister, and the people of Zonama Sekot had broken apart under her leadership. It was a failure that had torn at her for months, and now she had to watch and listen to the bitter end.

She felt too exhausted to even cry. At one point, after the cruiser *Yammka's Fury* burst into a ball of flame and debris, Harrar put a bony hand on her shoulder and said, "They go to the Gods now. Their methods were wrong, but their hearts burned with love for their people. Hopefully that will mean something when they are judged."

"It's not enough," Danni said hoarsely.

"No," Harrar admitted, "It is not."

"You won't change anything like this," said a female voice, soft and familiar.

They both turned around to see Jabitha standing in front of the closed entry door. She looked not as Danni had last seen her, as she'd been burned into her memory: gaunt, pale, dying from internal injuries. This Jabitha's skin was a healthy blue. Her face was full and bright and touched with a sly smile.

"Sekot," Harrar bowed his head. "You honor us with your presence."

Now it chose to show up. Part of Danni ached to know what had happened to Jacen and Jaina, but she was Magister and she had to take care of her people first.

"Can you stop this?" she asked.

"No," Sekot said simply.

"But you *have* to," Danni insisted. "Your children are dying up there by the thousands."

"I know how to reach into space, but I only know how to hurt when I do so." Jabitha's shoulders shrugged. "There are limits to the miracles I can work. You know that."

"You can bring people back from the dead," Danni said harshly. "Can't you save people while they're still alive?"

Jabitha's head shook. "I'm sorry, but I can't. That is *your* task, Magister Quee."

"They won't listen to me," she said bitterly. "They never have before."

Jabitha's tone was harsh. "So because you failed before, you've stopped trying all together?"

Danni scowled, but Harrar squeezed her shoulder and said, "Sekot is right. We must at least try to save our people."

"They won't listen," Danni repeated weakly.

"They didn't before," Sekot said. "But this time, you have something to offer them."

"And what is that?"

A smile spread on Jabitha's face. "The same thing my children were offered fifteen years ago. *Me*."

Danni blinked, and Sekot was gone. She turned to Harrar's gaunt face. He nodded and laid one hand on the closest villip. It winked to life under his palm.

Danni leaned close to the villip and put her own hand on it. She felt its surface ripple under her palm. These things had disgusted her when she was first exposed to them on frozen Helska 4, twenty years and a lifetime ago. Now this one beckoned to her. It was the only hope she had left.

"I am Danni Quee, Magister of Zonama Sekot," she spoke, and felt the villip hum beneath her hand as it relayed her words to the True Honor fleet in orbit. "Today I speak to all who will listen. Your commander is dead. Your forces are shattered. Very soon, you will be exterminated."

"I know some of you desire exquisite death. I know more of you are scared and angry and confused, because you didn't expect things to turn out like this. Well, life rarely does. I know mine..."

She trailed off, found a different tack. "All of you should know that Zonama Sekot offers you the same thing it did fifteen years ago. It offers you forgiveness. It offers you a home. It offers you a community and a purpose. I know it may not be the purpose you thought you wanted. I know it wasn't mine. But this is the place we've built together and it will always welcome you back.

"Please, don't feel ashamed. This is not surrender. This is just returning to the place where you belong. So please, *please*, stop fighting. Come down to Zonama. Land your ships on its surface. Step out and surrender your arms. I promise those attacking you will not follow because Sekot will not let them.

"So please, *please*, save yourselves. Save me. Come back to the place where you belong.

"Because there's no other place in the galaxy like this. This place... is a place of new beginnings.

"So please, return to Zonama Sekot, and we can begin again."

She took her hand off the villip and felt all breath and energy drain out of her. She sagged forward and Harrar helped prop her up. She staggered back and sat down in her seat. Then she watched and listened to see if the words that had flown out of her like a river had had any effect at all.

At first, nothing happened and the fight continued relentlessly on. Then the first ship peeled off and dove toward Zonama Sekot. It was a small picket that Chiss hadn't even bothered with. Then a frigate pulled away and descended into Zonama Sekot's atmosphere. A cruiser followed, and another. Danni watched and listened as more ships peeled off from the battle and sought shelter in Zonama Sekot. Some still fought, and those ships, faced with the concentrated onslaught of two entire fleets, died quickly.

The rest of them, most of them, dove into the embrace of Sekot's white clouds and clear skies, leaving the bitter night of space behind.

"They have come home," Harrar clapped Danni's arm. "Our people are whole again."

And so was she.

Chapter 38

Once he arrived at the island, it was easy to spot the black scar where Darth Krayt's shuttle had been destroyed. What had once been a green ledge atop a coastal cliff had, somehow, been turned into a still-smoking field of debris. Vilath Dal was no expert in mechanical vessels and had no idea how the Sith shuttle, which he'd naturally assumed to be impregnable, had been so utterly destroyed. But because he had come this far, he set his own shuttle to hover five meters above the wreckage zone and clambered down on a lowered tendril to examine the site more closely.

As he began to search the field he realized something must have collided with Krayt's ship. A missile, perhaps, but as he'd approached the island he'd found no sign of a ship that could have fired one. The only ships he'd marked at all as he'd entered the atmosphere was the flight of coralskippers that had originally escorted Krayt's shuttle down, now returning to the pitched and pointless fight Voran Lah had thrown himself into.

As he examined the scorched debris, he noticed two different types. Most of it consisted of charred, curled strips of metals commonly used by the infidels. He also, however, found pieces of almost organic-looking material, though it was certainly not Yuuzhan Vong, nor did it appear to be like the Rakatan vessel. Then he recalled the strange organic vessel, shaped vaguely like an eyeball that had been docked with *Revenge*.

He hadn't considered the option of infighting among the Sith before, but if his people could do it, why not the infidels?

The one thing that stood out was the lack of bodies. He didn't know if Sith dissolved into the Force upon death as some Jedi were said to, but he saw no signs of tattered clothes or other derelict personal affects. It was possible that the Sith had not been aboard the vessel when it was destroyed, and were instead alive elsewhere. He direly hoped as much. At this point, they were probably the only beings left in the galaxy who might have him.

He was about to climb the lowered tendril back to his shuttle when he spotted her.

He skipped and skirted around the strewn debris, but by the time he got to Dician's side he was sure she was dead. He bent low over her corpse and touched her cool forehead. He didn't dare touch the shrapnel buried in her torso. Hers had been a fine mind, and she'd helped him unlock secrets of Yuuzhan Vong bio-engineering not even Qelah Kwaad could have managed.

For a time, he'd imagined what other great scientific breakthroughs their combined knowledge could achieve, but that time was over.

He tried to set aside his grief and salvage the situation. He lightly ran his hands over her body, feeling the pockets of her vest and trousers. He had copied Qelah Kwaad's qahsa before leaving *Revenge*, including the information about supposedly removing Lord Krayt's armor entirely. What bits of it he'd skimmed had hardly looked promising, given that it required Krayt be *dead* before the armor was removed, but with greater research he might make improvements.

Assuming Krayt himself was still alive. If not, Vilath Dal was probably going to end up a hermit like his master. He'd probably go half-mad as he hid away from all the authorities that wanted to punish him for his work with the Sith and True Honor.

He felt a spike of hope as he pulled something from Dician's vest pocket. It was a long silver cylinder, almost like a narrower version of a Jedi lightsaber. She'd shown it to him before. She'd called it a 'mindspear,' and claimed it was salvaged Rakatan technology that could transfer the memories of one mind to that of a suitably prepared clone.

Well, it could be useful.

He stuffed the mindspear into his cloak and rose to his feet. He was not especially religious, but he paused over Dician's corpse and muttered a half-remembered supplication to Yun-Harla. He imagined Dician and the Trickster Goddess would have gotten along well.

Then he climbed back into his shuttle to see what else he could salvage.

Jaina clambered down the cliff as fast as she could. She lowered herself one foot at a time, down the the jagged face of black rock toward the bora trees below. Every so often she would carefully drop, then use the Force to alight on the cliff-face again, ten or twenty meters down.

She didn't slow or rest until she had safely dropped onto the forest floor.

This forest was different from the others on Zonama Sekot. It was a younger forest for a younger land mass. The boras were shorter and thinner, and if anything their mutlicolored leaves were even more brilliant, especially as the tropical sun burned brightly on the forest canopy.

She stretched out with the Force for some sign of either Darth Krayt or her brother. She couldn't tell whether the Dark Lord was alive or dead, but she could no longer find the angry nova of Dark Side energy he had been during the battle on the slope.

She couldn't sense Jacen either.

If he died, she would know it. She was sure of that. During the battle against Krayt the twin bond between them was stronger than it had ever been. Yet he had been horribly wounded in the fight, crushed by Krayt's armored embrace and when stabbed through the gut with a lightsaber. Even if he'd somehow managed to call on the Force and cushion his fall into the forest, he would be still be grievously wounded and vulnerable to Sith or whatever natural predators lived in these woods.

He was her twin brother, and no matter what he had done, no matter what she had done to him, she would never forgive herself if she let more harm come to him.

Jaina plunged deeper into the forest. The further she went, the older the trees were and the thicker their branches. Step by step, she walked out of sunlight and deeper into shadow.

He was, frankly, a pathetic sight. During the brief time Vilath Dal had known him, Darth Wyyrlok had been Krayt's most loyal and fearsome emissary. He'd carried himself erect and regal, and spoken with a deep commanding voice that did not need Force-tricks to compel you to obey. Though Vilath Dal had never seen him in action, he was sure Wyyrlok was a great warrior as well.

Well, not any more.

He lowered his shuttle over the shoals and dropped two tendrils to pluck the Chagrian's body out of the surf. As the tendrils raised it, salt water drained out of its heavy black cloak and splashed down onto the jutting igneous rocks.

The tendrils let Wyyrlok's body settle in the belly of the shuttle's cargo hold. Vilath Dal bent over it to examine the wounds. The Chagrian's tattooed face seemed scorched, not by flame but by something closer to electricity. Vilath Dal ran two hands over Wyyrlok's torso, searching for signs of more physical damage, though he knew Jedi lightsabers left wounds that cauterized automatically.

When he felt the slow movement of breath, he pulled both hands away in shock.

Wyyrlok's eyes strained to open. His mouth and throat strained to speak. He did not seem to have the strength to lift his limbs and Vilath Dal doubted he would survive much longer.

"Where is Lord Krayt?" Vilath Dal asked.

Wyyrlok wheezed, then seemed to choke on something.

"I will find your Master," Vilath Dal promised. "Just tell me where he is. *Please*."

"Vol... Volcano..." Wyyrlok rasped.

Did that mean he had thrown himself into the lava flowing down from the tip of the mountain? Vilath Dal didn't know, but had to at least search.

Then he remembered what Dician had told him before. He fished the mindspear out of his cloak and held it in front of

him. Wyyrlok saw it too, and wordless recognition showed on his scorched face.

"I have no idea how this works," Vilath Dal admitted.

Wyyrlok didn't seem to hear him, or anything else. He thumbed the tiny button located on one end of the mindspear. The other end glowed faintly red and emitted a low humming noise.

Then, because he had no idea what else to do, he got a firm grip on the mindspear and stabbed it into Wyyrlok's neck, right beneath the jaw. He had no idea how a Chagrian's neural network operated, but if it was anything like a human's, he was probably stabbing into the main neural stem entering the brain.

The pain of entry made Wyyrlok groan in pain once more. His body retched for a moment, then went still. His chest stopped rising and falling.

The Sith Lord was dead.

Vilath Dal pulled the mindspear out of Wyyrlok's neck. When he wiped away the blood and tissue he saw that the light on the forward tip had turned blue.

Presumably, that was a good sign.

Most Yuuzhan Vong, even most shapers, would be repulsed by this strange metal object he held in his hand. Vilath Dal would have been himself, not so long ago. Now he wanted nothing more to find Wyyrlok's clone, wherever the One Sith had hidden it, and see if this strange infidel technology really *could* transfer a being's mental pattern.

The possibilities were astounding.

His entire life and work were in shambles, but against all odds and reason, he was starting to feel giddy.

In losing everything he stood to gain so much more. He was starting to think the droning old priests might have been on to something when they'd talked about the necessity of sacrifice.

But first things first. He went back to the shuttle's cockpit and commanded it to fly toward the black volcano rising at the center of the island.

"There's so much life, isn't there?"

Jacen pried his eyelids open. Even that tiny effort stung. His entire body was racked with pain. His lungs burned with every

breath, his joints ached with every attempt to move. Pain shot up the entire right side of his body from the place where Krayt had stabbed him through with his lightsaber. He felt a drop of blood roll out his mouth and down the side of his face, where it pooled into the dirt, stones, and moss of the forest floor.

Jacen stared up at the high branches of the bora trees as they shifted in the breeze. Flecks of light broke through the shadows of the deep forest and danced like warm dots across his face.

Crouched at his side, Vergere regarded him with inscrutable avian eyes. He didn't know if it was his old master, or Sekot taking her image. Perhaps it didn't matter.

He opened his mouth to speak. Fire surged in his chest and sound shredded his throat but he said, "Did I do it?"

Vergere's head bobbed.

"Is he... dead?"

Her head shook. "You have preserved the future, Jacen Solo. Your Dark Man will come again, a long time from now, but when he does he will fail, and it will be for the last time."

Vergere's hand held up a battered silver cylinder: Darth Krayt's lightsaber.

No, not just his. Jacen knew it had once belonged to Krayt's father, Sharad Hett. A great Jedi. He tried to reach out and take Hett's lightsaber but he didn't have the strength. Softly, Vergere placed it in his hand. His fingers weakly wrapped around the cool firm metal.

He felt something else spill down the side of his face; hot tears.

"I'm dying." He tried to say more but couldn't find breath.

Vergere nodded. "In the story of your life, Jacen Solo, is this your best ending?"

He thought on that, even as dying pain wracked his body. It was better than dying as he'd had before, a mad dog stabbed through by his sister's blade.

There was so much he still wanted to do: hold Tenel Ka in his arms, kiss Allana's forehead, beg forgiveness from Luke, look into his parents' eyes again. He wanted to explore this beautiful planet and delve deeper into the mysteries of the universe and maybe, just maybe, touch the Unifying Force as completely as he had during the summit of his life, fifteen years ago.

But even if he lived a century more, he knew he never would.

He couldn't be sad. He'd been given the miracle of a second chance, and with it he had finally accomplished the goal for which he had sacrificed everything. This time he had done it without the rage and hatred, the arrogance and ruthlessness of the Sith. He had accomplished it through the love and trust of the people who mattered to him: his sister, Ben, Tahiri, Harrar and Danni, even the nameless final Skywalker who would finally deliver rest to another sad orphan boy from Tatooine.

It was good enough. Except for one thing.

Shadows from high tree branches covered his face. He turned his head to watch the high canopy. Tiny flecks of light wink in his eyes and were gone just as fast.

He said, "I want... to die... in the light."

He turned his head, and no one was there.

He lay there for a long time, staring shadows shifting across the forest floor. He could feel his energy draining, as though it was seeping into the soil beneath him through his wounds.

He reached into the Force and gathered his strength. Then he felt the hands of the planet rise to touch him. Sekot pushed him upright, until he stood on wavering legs. He tried to stagger forward and fell against the closest tree.

The pain was incredible. He tried to remember what his teacher had told him about pain. He staggered onward, half-falling from tree to tree, clutching Sharad Hett's lightsaber all the time, but he never stopped.

He thought he saw some specks of light on the forest floor, barely visible through the tree-trunks ahead. He kept going toward it, even as the white tried to eat him whole.

He kneels in the hot Tatooine sand and stares at the hem of Jedi robes in front of him. His entire being quivers with fear and rage. With one hand he clasps the scorched stump where Kenobi-

He is shocked to discover that both hands are there. His body is not covered by the home-spun robes of the Tusken, but by the jagged biological armor of the Yuuzhan Vong. He raises a hand, presses it against his face, and feels the rough surface of

his mask. He runs his hand down to trace his fingers over his dry lips and the rough old skin of his chin.

He looks up at the Jedi standing over him.

"It didn't have to turn out this way," Anakin tells him.

It is impossible. He is an old man locked in Yuuzhan Vong armor but Anakin wears the smooth face of almost seventy years ago. It must be a Force vision, but this vision shows neither past nor future.

Maybe it is showing him both.

"What is this?" he begs the vision, or the ghost. "Where are we?"

"The place we came from. The place we never really left."

He looks more closely at Anakin. No, this is not the Anakin he sparred against, the Anakin he battled the Confederacy with. Nor is it the dark masked man he battled one snowy night on Naboo. The anger is gone from him, as is the terrible drive.

For the first time since A'Sharad Hett first met him, Anakin Skywalker seems at peace.

"Tell me Skywalker," he rasps, "Am I dead?"

"Do you want to be?" the Jedi asks kindly.

"No," he says instantly. "No, I have... so much to do."

Anakin raises an eyebrow. "You're stubborn, aren't you A'Sharad?"

"Don't call me that," he snaps. "A'Sharad Hett is as dead as you. I am Darth Krayt."

"You won't win, A'Sharad." Anakin shakes his head sadly.

"Don't look down on me, Anakin! Don't you dare it!" he says. He tries to rise to his feet and look down into Skywalker's eyes but he can't muster the strength get off his knees.

"Any man can be redeemed if he truly wants it," Anakin says.

"There's still hope for you, A'Sharad. All you have to do is choose."

He snarls, "No! I am stronger than you! I will never enslave myself to another! The Dark Side is my power, my strength, and I will use it to-"

"You never use the Dark Side, it only uses you," Anakin says sharply. "I know that better than anyone."

"It used you because you were weak."

"I was," Anakin admits. "And so are you."

"No!" he shouts, but still he cannot stand. "I am stronger than you, stronger than anyone! I-"

-light in his face-

Darth Krayt opened his eyes. He stared upward at the rustling, shifting branches of trees overhead. The bright light of the sun shone through the forest canopy and made a rainbow of the multi-colored bora leaves.

The sun went away. A shadow fell over his face. He squinted, trying to make sense of the dark form in front of him. He realized with a sense of shock that he was staring at the gaunt, tattooed face of a Yuuzhan Vong shaper. He struggled to find his name.

"Do not struggle, Lord Krayt," the shaper said. "You have been badly injured and are close to dying. But do not fear. I will heal you. Again."

"Why?" It took all his effort to rasp out one syllable.

Vilath Dal considered for a moment. "There is nothing for me elsewhere. In addition, I believe your organization offers me great opportunity for professional growth."

The Vong was deluded. He *had* no organization left. Yes, he had some resources stockpiled away in distant corners of the galaxy, and some of his acolytes lay in hiding, but he had brought the bulk of his One Sith to Zonama Sekot.

In his arrogance, he had attempted a frontal assault on the Jedi and lost everything. It would take years, maybe decades to rebuild, if he survived at all. If he did, he would have to find some new way to strike the Jedi and break the spine of the galaxy,

Something hard and cool was placed in his hand. He turned his head and strained to see: a lightsaber. Not Sharad Hett's, but the one he had built himself. It had been scorched and battered during the fight, and might need repairs to work again.

It seemed to him then like a sign of all his weakness. If he survived, he would build new weapons for himself, and they would glow red with the bloody light of the Sith.

"I found it in the forest," Vilath Dal said. "You still have battles left in you, Lord Krayt."

Even if he could speak, Krayt could not bring himself to thank the Yuuzhan Vong. The torture they had inflicted on him

once had transformed him forever, and now his broken body would be helpless before whatever greater punishments this Vong would inflict.

"Do not worry, Lord Krayt," Vilath Dal thrust his pointed teeth forward in a hideous imitation of a human smile. "I am here to save you, not harm you. I believe the partnership between the Sith and the Yuuzhan Vong has only begun."

The very thought filled him with fear and rage. He clung to those emotions, as he had all his life. He had survived on them for almost a century.

If he had to, he would survive on them for a century more.

Jacen walked out of the darkness and into the light.

He had staggered through the forest, he didn't know how far, less walking than falling again and again and catching himself on the nearest tree-trunk. His fingers, already scorched from when his lightsaber had exploded in his hand, were torn and bleeding from clawing against so much rough bark. Sharad Hett's lightsaber was stuffed tight into the inside of his belt, and miraculously hadn't fallen free.

In his struggling he had torn open the cauterized wound in his side and blood was spilling down his waist and hip. His ribs were broken and his arms and legs strained with every movement. The white of pain threatened to swallow him at any moment, no matter how much he pulled on the Force for strength.

But when he saw warm sunlight spill across a broad clearing covered in soft green grass, he knew he was home.

He pushed himself free of the forest's edge and managed one, two, three long strides toward the clearing's center. He keeled over, nearly fell, but managed two more steps before he tumbled face-first into the grass. He twisted his body and fell on his side, and pain shot out from his broken ribs. He rolled himself onto his back and lay on green grass, arms and legs spread out, staring at the brilliant white sun and the cloudless blue sky.

It was almost like the Yavin 4 sky of his youth.

No, it was better.

He lay totally still except for the rise and fall of breath. Bright light burned into his eyes but he didn't close them. It felt like his spirit was leaving his body once again, drifting free of this vessel Sekot had fashioned for him, reaching for the bright white of the sun and beyond, to all the billion suns scattered across the universe.

He tried to find the sun that warmed his daughter.

It was easier than he'd dared hope. He could feel Allana, and Tenel Ka with her. He touched their minds and felt them touch back: tentative, frightened, hopeful, confused. There was so much he wanted to say, but he was dying and they were millions of light-years away.

Still, he tried.

He told them how he loved them both, and how sorry he was for all the pain he'd caused them.

He told Allana that she would be a braver and a stronger Jedi than he ever was, and that the galaxy would be a peaceful and just place as long as she stayed true to what her mother taught her. All her father had ever wanted was to make the galaxy safe for her, and while he'd gone horribly far astray, he had found his way in the end, done what he'd promised to do, and was satisfied.

He opened his heart up and tried to throw across the void all the memories and emotions that were surging through his dying body:

-the shock of seeing her in her mother's arms for the first time, the immense need to protect her at all costs-

-the ache in his broken heart whenever she called him, in blissful loving innocence, 'Uncle Jacen' -

-the way he'd marveled at the fragile strength of her small shoulder-blades beneath his palms when he wrapped his arms around her in a hug-

And for Tenel Ka, he reminded her of things long ago and far away, before war and suffering and death had invaded their lives. He shared it with her, all he could-

-sunlight gleaming on the leaves of the forest canopy as the adrenaline-rush of a morning run pulsed through their bodies-

-the way he wiggled his eyebrows up and down after yet another stupid joke, and the way she stared at him in stony

response, trying so hard to keep any mirth from showing-

-touching the cut-off stub of her arm for the first time; a soft, tentative, frightened touch, still shocked and ashamed at the damage he'd done-

-the tickle of her long red-gold hair as he'd buried his face against her shoulder and neck as they'd pressed each other close to fend off the freezing cold of Ryloth's nightside, the knowledge that he'd always wanted to embrace her but had never wanted it like this-

-the first time she'd kissed him, and pulled back, and he'd stared into her warm gray eyes and found himself utterly speechless while their friends, sitting all around, burst into laughter-

-that cliffside view she'd dragged him through the jungle to see, where they'd sat side-by-side in the golden late-afternoon light, close but never touching, a place so beautiful he'd just had to share it with Anakin and Jaina-

-the kiss she should have given to him on the worldship at Myrkr, and the restrained regret on her face that she hadn't as she watched him follow Vergere's path after the voxyn queen, promising he'd be back soon, never imagining the ways his life and hers were about to change forever-

He told her that he'd admired her and loved her since the day they met, and that he was so, so sorry he hadn't made it clear when they were young.

Just maybe, everything could have been different. It was a bitter regret, and a sweet hope.

He didn't know how much of it got through to them, but it was all he could do.

His strength was fading. The sun seemed to dim as he watched it. The pain in his limbs, chest, side, everything was fading. He could barely feel the grass beneath him.

Then he felt something, a brief hard peck at his cheek. With great effort, he rolled his head to see a bird staring at him. Not his teacher, but an actual bird, with tiny black eyes, a green body, brown wings, and long tail-feathers that shimmered with the colors of the rainbow.

He felt light pressure on his chest and moved his head again. Another bird was perched atop him. Two more dropped out of

the air, tucked flapping wings against their sides, and dropped down next to him.

Rest, they spoke to him with the voice of a planet.

It hurt, but he smiled.

Peace, they said.

Jaina stepped out of the shadow and saw Jacen lying in a patch of sunny grass. There were birds with long rainbow tails surrounding him, resting at his elbows and knees and perched on his shoes. One of them sat on his chest and seemed to be pointing its beaked face at Jacen's own.

When she stepped close to her brother, the birds burst into the air as one. The breath of their flapping wings stuck her face and rainbow light flashed in her eyes. Shadows winked over her, and they were gone.

She hoped, expected, prayed that Jacen would sit up and turn and look at her with that cocky slanted Solo grin, but he did not.

She could still feel him through the Force, but he was so very weak.

She dropped to her knees and pulled his head into her lap. She stroked his hair with one hand. The pose, the weight, felt so familiar. His eyes blinked open and focused slowly on her face.

"Hey," she sniffed, gently running her fingertips across his cheek. She wiped away the blood trailing from his mouth with a forefinger.

"Hey," he said, very quietly.

"Listen, Jace, it's okay," she said. Her heart was frantic and her eyes were wet with tears. "Sekot made a new body for you once. It can do it again, and you'll be all better, and then we can bring mom and dad, and Luke, and Tenel Ka and Allana and we can all..."

"No," he whispered. "Jaina, I'm... all right..."

He didn't have the strength to explain it, not in words. But he didn't need to. He was Jacen and she was Jaina, and they understood each other perfectly, even though it broke her heart to have her brother die a second time.

"Jaina," he croaked, "I need... do something... for me."

"I'll do anything," she said.

Somehow, he lifted one hand. He placed it on the cylinder tucked inside his belt. She recognized it as Krayt's lightsaber. At first she didn't understand, but then Jacen touched her mind and showed her what to do.

"No problem," she said. "You got it."

A weak smile creased his face. His hand fell to his side.

She could feel him fading fast. She wiped away tears with her good arm and placed a kiss on his dirty forehead.

"Nice spot though," Jacen whispered.

"Yeah," Jaina admitted. "You do know how to pick 'em."

She pulled her legs out from beneath his head and rested it on the ground so he could stare up at the sky. She kicked her legs out across the grass next to him and stared at the bright sun overhead.

She stroked Jacen's dirty hair with one hand, closed her eyes and felt the light burn through her eyelids. She stretched out with the Force and felt life all around her: not just her brother's fading spark, but the trees and grasses, the birds and the insects, the entire symphony of a living world that would continue onward even after her brother's spark and her own burned out. She had been told so many times but now, after so much loss, she finally understood: *There is no death, there is only the Force.*

Very quietly, Jacen said, "This is good, isn't it?"

Something feather-light touched her cheek, and she felt a presence she hadn't known for over fifteen years. She looked down at Jacen and saw a white smile crease his face. Tears of joy spilled from her eyes. He'd felt it too.

She heard a voice say: *Welcome home, brother.*

For the last time, Jacen closed his eyes.

Peace.

Epilogue: The Light at the End

“Do you know what it is I want?”

“Peace? Knowledge? A clear conscience?”

“All of those things are required for a good life. And all of them have a price.”

“So is that what you want? To pay the price and earn a good life?”

“I think that's what we all want, Jacen Solo.”

The gentle curve of Zonama Sekot's surface could not be seen through the mouth of the main hangar bay on *Starless*, but one could spot the faint corona of light that seemed to emanate from the planet's surface. Wynssa knew the planet itself was not aglow, merely reflecting the light of its primary star off its daytime surface, but that faint brightness still felt warm and welcoming across the blackness of space.

It was an uncharacteristic thought, and one she did not voice to her brother.

The two of them stood at the head of a welcoming party made up of one column of Chiss and two columns of Alliance infantry. They could not yet see their father's shuttle through the hangar mouth, though his flagship was visible in Zonama's lower orbit.

Her brother was trying very hard not to show his nervousness. That discipline- Chiss, Imperial, Fel, wherever it came from- kept his posture stiff and his face a guarded mask.

As she watched him from the corner of her eye, Wynssa could not get over how much he looked like a younger, smaller version of their father. The beard and eyepatch simply highlighted the similarities in facial structure and bearing. Their father would surely see the resemblance too.

The only one who seemed worried about how the Baron would see him was Jag.

Quietly, so the others couldn't hear, Wynssa asked, "Have you heard from your wife?"

Jag flinched a little, disturbed from some reverie. He looked at Wynssa and said, "Yes. I got a brief comm from her two hours ago. She's all right. They're all alright."

From his tone there seemed to be more than that. Wynssa pressed, "Are you sure?"

Jag blew air from his nose. "Wynssa, I'll... I'll explain it all later. I promise. It's a *very* long story."

Wyn nodded curtly. "I look forward to it." She really did.

"I also want to say thank you."

"For what?" she asked, though she already knew.

Jagged looked like he was going to answer; then his eyes darted away from her and he said, "He's coming."

He didn't point, but Wynssa could spot the engine-flares of a shuttle leaving *Blue Star's* hangar and vectoring toward *Starless*.

Jagged swallowed. "Is there anything more you can tell me?"

Wynssa shook her head slightly. "I didn't know he was coming any more than you did. I certainly didn't expect a fleet. I sent our coordinates to Csilla, explained our situation, and that was all."

"I thought you said father was retired."

"He is, though he retains certain influence. He's actually been calling for greater involvement with the galaxy at large, which I assumed was your influence. He seems to have gotten his wish."

"I'm glad. I'm glad that my... disgrace did not permanently dishonor the rest of you."

His voice trembled a little as he spoke, and for the first time she understood the extent of her brother's shame. He'd lived a life torn between too many worlds, and every time he'd had to shift allegiance he'd had to give something up. She realized now just how much losing his family had hurt him, and how badly he wished to make amends.

Now that he was about to get his chance, he looked more nervous than ever.

"You don't have anything to be afraid of, Jagged."

He snorted softly. "I was always afraid of our father."

Wynssa frowned. Growing up, Jagged had always seemed the sure one, the straight arrow, the one most likely to carry on

their father's legacy. When she'd felt afraid of their father, she had looked to *him* for strength.

"You don't have to be," she said.

"How do you know that? You just said you have no idea why he's here."

"I didn't know why he's coming," Wynssa said as the shuttle grew closer. "But I think I have an idea why he's here."

Jag looked at her sharply. "What does that mean?"

"Politics on Csilla have gotten... complicated since the Swarm War."

"Meaning *what*?"

Wynssa cleared her throat and turned her attention to the shuttle as it dipped into *Starless's* hangar bay. "You're about to find out."

They all were.

The shuttle passed through the energy envelope and fired its repulsors. It set down gently on the hangar deck ten meters in front of Jag and Wyn. They waited, watched, and didn't move an inch until the ramp extended beneath the shuttle's nose.

A pair of Chiss soldiers walked out with their rifles slung over their shoulders. Two more followed. Then a single pair of boots stepped down the ramp. They led to two long legs and a slim body encased in a black uniform.

Wynssa's brother sucked in breath. "Shawnkyr!"

The Chiss admiral stood at the base of the landing ramp, hands tucked behind her back. Wynssa snapped to a salute, which Shawnkyr acknowledged with a tiny nod. She shifted her glowing red gaze to Jagged and said, "It's very good to see you again... Commander, is it?"

"That's right," Jagged laughed nervously. "I have a hard time keeping track myself. I had no idea you were, ah--"

"An admiral now," Shawnkyr nodded.

"Yes, of course." Jagged's eyes darted to the silver rank insignia pinned to the collar of her uniform. With a relieved smile, he said, "Thanks for having my wing again."

"It was my pleasure, though you shouldn't thank me. I wasn't the one who convinced the Houses to send the fleet."

Shawnkyr stepped aside and glanced up the landing ramp. Wynssa, still holding her salute, watched as Baron Soontir Fel

stepped into view with his hands clasped behind his back. He wore the black Chiss naval uniform Wynssa had grown up seeing him in, but which he hadn't put on in a number of years. It looked natural on him. Like Jagged, he wore a black patch over one eye. His hair and beard had mostly gone white, and his long face was heavily lined, but he still retained the broad shoulders, stiff back, and lean body he'd had since they were children.

The line of Chiss behind her saluted. Jagged hesitated, then raised his hand as well.

Their father stared at them both, dark eyes minutely shift-ing from one to the other than back again.

Finally, he said, "Put your hand down, Jagged. You need salute no one."

Stiffly, Jag lowered his hand to his side. Wynssa kept hers up.

Jagged said, "Welcome aboard *Starless*, sir."

"It's a fine ship you have."

"Thank you, sir."

The baron shook his head. "I'm not a 'sir' any more. You're your own man, Jagged."

Jag swallowed and said nothing. He looked ashamed. Wynssa knew that ten years' distance was not going to be bridged instantly, or easily.

The baron shifted attention to his daughter. "Commodore Fel, report."

"I regret to report that *Celestial* was destroyed in the previous battle," Wynssa said, still saluting. "However, sixty percent of the crew was evacuated. After the last battle, we retain fifty percent of our shuttle capacity and seventy-four percent of our fighter wing."

"Location of your remaining crew and hardware?" asked Shawnkyr.

"All clawcraft and crew are aboard *Vindicator*, standing by for transfer orders."

"Very good. At ease, Commodore."

"Yes, sir." Wynssa lowed her hand, finally.

The baron shifted his attention back to Jagged. "I believe we have a lot to talk about. Have the other parties arrived?"

"The captains from *Corusca Gem*, *Resolve*, and *Vindicator* have arrived. We are awaiting the party from the planet. Captain Antilles is preparing the conference room now."

"Antilles?"

"Syal Antilles," Jagged said meaningfully.

Emotion flitted over their father's face. "I should very much like to meet her."

"Then follow me-" Jag paused, then said, "General Baron."

Jagged turned and began walking toward the exit. His father and Shawnkyr followed, and Wynssa took the rear. Yes, it was going to take some time. Call it what you like- Imperial, Chiss, Fel- that discipline didn't break easily. Wynssa knew that better than anyone.

But with time, and effort, she was sure it would crack.

As their escort led them from the auxiliary hangar to the conference room, Harrar remarked to Danni and Ben, "This situation feels both familiar and different, but I am reminded of the peace conference aboard *Ralroost* fifteen years ago. That ceremony was... grander, and after a harder war, but not dissimilar."

"I was on Zonama Sekot at the time," said Danni, "Though I've seen the holo-recordings."

"Yeah, that's a little before my time," Ben remarked.

The priest said, "Consider this your opportunity to make history."

Danni had come to know Harrar well enough to tell that he was in a good mood. To her own surprise, she was also feeling confident. The remaining True Honor ships had all landed on Zonama Sekot's southern hemisphere and surrendered without incident. Most of the mutinous Yuuzhan Vong remained on the lower continents, under watch of loyal warriors from the Ganner sect, as well as Extolled followers of Yu'shaa.

Rehabilitating them was not going to be easy, and Danni felt a little relieved that their flagship and warmaster had perished in the collision with *Chimaera*. She just had to convince the others at the table to trust Zonama Sekot, and for the first time in a while, she felt confident she could do that.

Ben Skywalker, however, was a mystery to her. Nearly a day after the battle had ended, a survey shuttle had picked up a distress signal from an island near Zonama's equator. It had brought back Ben Skywalker and Jaina Solo, both heavily battered and emotionally exhausted. For reasons not quite clear to Danni, Jaina had decided to stay on-planet, leaving Ben Skywalker to come with Danni and Harrar and represent the Jedi interest at the conference.

Jaina had explained what had happened to Jacen on the island. Strangely, learning of his second death had given Danni a sense of closure. When they'd said goodbye before the battle, something- instinct or the Force- had told her she would never see Jacen again. Already his brief resurrection was taking on the quality of a dream. Still, she felt calmed by the knowledge that Jacen had cast off the practices of the Sith and found some kind of redemption, even if the specifics were beyond her comprehension.

Ben Skywalker did not seem calm. He was sullen and distracted with a grief wholly separate from what had happened to Jacen. Danni did not understand what had happened to him on the island; Jaina had said that Ben merely needed time.

Danni tried to put all that behind her when the escort led them into the conference room. It was a narrow room with a low ceiling, not the large convocation hall on *Ralroost*. There were no holo-journalists crammed in to record this meeting. She took in those assembled with one sweeping glance: At the head of the table was Jagged Fel, looking older and worn with his eyepatch and beard, a blonde woman in a black Chiss uniform (his sister Wynssa), and another woman in Alliance blues (his cousin Syal) who was talking to a bigger, older version of Jagged (the Baron General, surely). On one side of the long table was a human woman about her age and a big feathery Calibop; on the other, two Imperial men, one young and one old, plus a blue-skinned Chiss woman whose age she couldn't guess. Up front to greet them was a white-furred Bothan male she immediately recognized.

"Welcome, Magister Quee," the Bothan said. "I'm not sure if we've ever met properly. I am Traest Kre'fey."

"It is good to see you alive and hale, Admiral," Harrar said.

Kre'fey's violet eyes lit in recognition. "Likewise, High Priest. And Jedi Skywalker."

Ben gave a slight nod.

Kre'fey pointed them to their seats at the opposite end of the oval table from Jagged Fel, then gave quick introductions to the others in the room. Danni was a little surprised to see two captains from the renegade fleet here: *Phoenix's* Floran Welby representing the Alliance element and *Resolve's* young Griff Veed representing Daala's people. She hoped it was a sign the talk would be amicable.

Captain Antilles began the talk by addressing the issue of the renegade factions.

"We've re-established contact with the communications station at Esfandia," she was saying. "As such, we've been able to give Coruscant an update on our status."

"And what was their recommendation?" Welby asked. The woman wore one arm in a sling. She sounded hoarse and weary, resigned to her fate.

"Bwa'tu and Loran are discussing options with Wynn Dorvan," Antilles said, "But the most likely option is that all surviving True Victory officers will stand trial in a military court for mutiny."

Welby nodded acceptance. "And what of our crew?"

"Bwa'tu is proposing a blanket amnesty for all who pass an initial review," Antilles said. "Loran had some objections. That's something else to work out with Dorvan."

"Officers and convicted crewmen will have the right to representation at the military courts," added Pavric.

Captain Veed turned to the older captain sitting next to him. "And what's our fate to be, Sol?"

"I've spoken with Bastion," Vernetet said. "Head of State Riege is... less forgiving than his Alliance counterparts."

"I expected as much," Veed said with a small sneer. "What did he say?"

"Crewman will be sentenced to two years of labor. Officers will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by a military judge. All sentences are on the table, including execution for mutiny."

Veed nodded slightly. "Harsh. Almost enough to make me respect him."

"For what it's worth, Captain, I argued for more lenient sentences. It's not good for our people to fight their own."

"You can expect more of it if Reige continues his flirtation with... *democracy*." He said it like a dirty word and cast a sidelong glare at Jagged Fel.

Fel didn't flinch. He said, "Captain Veed, I was wondering if you've had a chance to debrief the crew from *Chimaera* that escaped before her destruction."

"We have." Veed nodded curtly. "What is it you want to know?"

"One of our people, Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor from *Justifier*, was taken captive by Daala. I was wondering if you had any word on her fate."

"Executed by Daala herself for attempted mutiny," Veed said with a touch of pride.

"Mutiny? So she *did* join Daala's crew for a time?"

"Daala made her captain of *Chimaera*." Veed shook his head, like he couldn't fathom such a decision.

Jag, however, flinched visibly. His jaw slipped open in surprise, and Danni noticed a similar expression on his sister's face. Whatever they'd just realized, though, they kept to themselves.

Jagged's father cleared his throat and said, "The Chiss Ascendancy has also been in contact with Vitor Reige. We are pleased to announce the normalizing of diplomatic relations with the Galactic Empire, and the intent to establish an embassy on Bastion."

That sent a murmur of surprise around the table. Even Jagged Fel looked shocked.

"I'm sorry, but what does that *mean* exactly?" Pavric asked. "Are the Chiss going to be establishing trade with the rest of the galaxy? Exchange of intelligence? Military materials?"

"Imperial military technology has been adopted by the Chiss since Grand Admiral Thrawn's time," Baron Fel said. "Because of that, and other ties to the Empire, the Houses have decided that Bastion is the ideal place to establish the Ascendancy's first consulate."

"And what of the Alliance?" Kre'fey spoke up. "Will you be establishing relations with Coruscant as well?"

"We have not decided yet, but I've made arrangements to speak with Wynn Dorvan on the matter. Personally."

Jagged Fel looked like he was dizzy. Danni knew the feeling. However, he raised his voice above the murmur and said, "The details of this development can be discussed later, with a more select audience. However, there is another matter in need of discussion."

"The ronto in the room," Ben muttered.

Veed looked at Danni. "Yes, what *are* they going to do with you? I'm a little curious about that."

Danni felt other eyes settle on her. She leaned forward, clasped her hands on the table-top, and said, "All of the ships from the True Honor fleet have either surrendered or been destroyed. Just as you are dealing with your mutineers, we will deal with ours."

"How?" Pavric said pointedly.

"Much the same way you have. The high-ranking True Honor leaders will be sentenced to harsh punishments. The rest will be decided on a case-by-case basis."

"You would give amnesty to majority of the crew?" Pavric's feathers ruffled. "The Yuuzhan Vong are a race of fanatics."

"I know the Yuuzhan Vong better than anyone in this room except for Harrar," Danni said firmly. "I also know how deep their culture runs and how dangerous they can be. That's why former True Honor members will be sent to our southern continent to work with ongoing land reclamation projects. The crews will be mixed with loyal Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroans so they can better integrate into Zonama's society. It will take time, it will not be easy, and we will always be on the lookout for trouble, but I believe it can be done."

Baron Fel said, "As I understand it, Zonama Sekot was designated by the Jedi as a place to house defeated Yuuzhan Vong. This planet was *given* to them."

"Zonama Sekot is their rightful home."

"Still, they were *allowed* to have it at the end of the last war, despite their position as loser in the conflict, primarily due to the generosity of Luke Skywalker and Admiral Kre'fey." He kept his eye on Danni instead of the Bothan. "Yet now you

speaking as though you are independent and on equal footing with three great political powers. Frankly, I find this incredible."

Danni glanced at Antilles. "What did Bwa'tu and Loran say about us?"

She swallowed and said, "They mentioned it only briefly. It was something they'd have to talk to Dorvan about."

Veed snorted. "As expected. In another ten years we'll have more Vong renegades to deal with. You people never learn."

"I think they've learned pretty well," Ben Skywalker spoke up. He looked around the table and said, "Zonama Sekot isn't *equal* to the rest of you. It's *greater*. It already wiped out one fleet that was trying to destroy it. If you try to force your will on it, it can destroy you or flee across the galaxy. Letting the Magister handle it her way is your only option if you want to keep your hides."

Danni was surprised how forcefully Ben put it, more forcefully than she, Harrar, or Sekot itself ever would have, yet what he'd said was unvarnished truth. An awkward silence settled over the room.

Finally, the Chiss admiral said, "The boy has a point."

"It appears our only option is to handle our own problems internally," Kre'fey said. "At the same time, all parties must work hard to build trust, so that another conflict like this never arises."

Jagged cleared his throat and said, "It occurs to me that if Csilla can make greater strides to integrate itself into the rest of the galaxy, then Zonama Sekot can also."

Danni raised an eyebrow. "You expect us to make an embassy on Bastion?"

"Perhaps not that much," Vernedet said, "But it seems to me that the exchange of emissaries may... decrease the misunderstandings between all our peoples."

"I will... consider that," Danni said evenly.

By 'consider' she meant have a long and difficult talk with Sekot, and there was no way of knowing how that would end. Yet she suspected that Sekot would be willing to take on Alliance, Imperial, even Chiss representatives on its surface, provided they were unarmed. The living world might or might not care about interstellar politics, but it *did* care about

expanding its horizons, and better contact with the known galaxy would help toward that end.

Not all of the people at the table understood her meaning, but Jagged seemed to. He said, "I looked forward to your final answer. However, I don't think any parties here would object to placing an observer or two on Zonama's surface."

His father gave the slightest nod.

Harrar, who had been quiet until now, said, "I believe we may have found groundwork for an enduring compromise."

"I hope so," Jagged said, and as he looked around the room she knew he referred to more than just Zonama Sekot. "What we've accomplished here has been difficult, and every side has lost good people. I just hope we've earned the wisdom to avoid the same mistakes in the future."

Kre'fey tilted his head and said, "Wisdom, commander, is all we can ever hope for."

For a long time, Miranda's quarters on *Phoenix* had felt like a prison cell. They were small and cramped enough, for a start. The fact that very similar quarters had served as a literal prison cell for Myri Antilles had certainly influenced her feelings, and after the surrender to Trinity Fleet her room had become a literal cell also.

Now it felt different. She wouldn't say it felt like home, because she didn't know what home felt like, but she no longer felt trapped between the narrow bulkheads. She could feel comfortable here, at least when she was alone.

At the moment, however, she was not alone and she was not comfortable. She was sitting at the room's small two-chair table across from a tired-looking young man her own age. They were both staring at the items in the center of the table: one lightsaber, and smaller cylindrical data rod.

"I wanted to give these to you in person," she said. "I can't really say why. I just felt I owed you, maybe."

Skywalker didn't touch them.

"They're yours, both of them," she said. "They have nothing to do with me any more."

"The data rod?" he asked, still not looking at her.

"The one you swapped out for mine at Tosche Station," she said. "It was a slick move. I didn't catch it and didn't think to check. It's what I get for underestimating a Jedi."

"Well, I underestimated you, so now we're even," Skywalker reached out and picked up the data rod first. He held it up, as if to examine it.

"It still works," she said.

"Did you see what was on it?"

She nodded. "I figured you'd want it back."

"Thank you," he said, and placed it in the pocket of his vest. Then he picked up his lightsaber and held that up for examination.

"I heard you saved Admiral Kre'fey with this."

"I was surprised as anyone," she admitted.

"Why did you do it?"

She'd had plenty of time to ponder that. It had been two days since the battle, and in her position as auxiliary communication tech for *Phoenix*, she'd had plenty of down-time while more important people oversaw the post-battle clean-up and tried to organize the strange concoction of Imperial, Alliance, Chiss, and Yuuzhan Vong that had gathered at Zonama Sekot.

"I didn't want to do nothing," she said. It wasn't the most enlightening revelation in the universe, but it was all she had.

Skywalker didn't seem to mind. He smiled faintly and met her eyes. She hadn't realized how blue they were. He said, "What you did was enough. I hear the admiral's very grate-ful."

"Unofficially, he's offered me a place at the Alliance naval academy."

"With his recommendation, I don't think you'll have any problems getting in. If that's what you want."

She'd had plenty of time to ponder that too. She gave a small sigh and said, "My parents both served in the Alliance navy. It didn't end well for either of them."

"Your parents went through a lot of nasty wars. Things should be calming down now, finally."

"Are they?" she crossed her arm over her chest. "Are you telling me the Vong won't go on the warpath, Daala's dead, and your Sith buddies are gone for good?"

"Would you trust the word of a Jedi?" Skywalker raised a brow.

She wasn't sure. She no longer had the smoldering hatred of the Jedi that she'd had after Jacen Solo's war, but trust was a hard thing for her. She wouldn't believe *any* Jedi, not off the bat. But as she looked at Skywalker's eyes she saw compassion, and a quiet sadness.

"Are they?" she repeated, her tone softer.

"The Yuuzhan Vong won't cause any trouble," Skywalker said firmly. "And radical elements in both the Alliance and the Empire have taken heavy losses."

"What about the Chiss?" Miranda didn't trust anybody who went to great lengths to act secretive and mysterious.

"We're working on that now, but it seems like the Chiss are willing to open themselves up to the galaxy more than they have before. I've heard they're already establishing a consulate on Bastion. Hopefully one on Coruscant won't be far behind."

"And the Sith?" she asked.

Skywalker looked away. "The Sith are never gone for good, just like Jedi aren't either."

"Think you can share the galaxy?" she asked sardonically.

"Right now we won't have to. The Sith that worked with the Yuuzhan Vong and came down to Zonama Sekot are dead. All of them."

As far as Miranda knew, there had only been a trio of Jedi with Trinity Fleet. "Three of you against a ship-full of Sith? That sounds impressive."

"We had... help."

She heard an aching in his voice. He was trying to hide his feelings but Miranda was good at reading faces. The Jedi had had help during the battle, and now that help was gone.

"Who did you lose?" she asked softly.

Skywalker exhaled. "People I didn't think I'd miss."

"I'm sorry," she said honestly.

"I'll be okay," Skywalker said, a little too forcefully. He was trying to convince himself. "I've lost people before. I just need time to work things out."

Miranda looked down at the table. She ran her finger-tips around the smoothed wood of its edge and said, "I've lost

people too. Obviously. And obviously I didn't take it too well. I let it twist me up inside. So I can't help you that much. But you need something more than grief. Something better than memory. You need a future. You need something to live for, something specific."

"Do you have something?"

She thought about Kre'fey's offer. She thought about her father, and how Cole Fardreamer had loyally served the Alliance even after his wife had died in its service. He'd been a man surprisingly free of regrets, and always proud about how he'd helped Luke Skywalker once, when he was just a teenage deckhand.

Her father had had something to live for. Maybe she should have followed his example instead of raging over his loss.

"I think I might," she said cautiously. "It's going to be weird. And not easy."

Skywalker smiled a sad smile. "Nothing worth doing is easy."

She raised an eyebrow. "Jedi wisdom?"

"No," he said. "That's just life."

The observation deck on *Starless's* secondary hangar bay had an extraordinary view. Through its viewport, Scut could see the blues, greens, and whites of Zonama Sekot glowing beneath the fleet. Silhouetted against it was a strange mélange of Imperial, Alliance, and Chiss vessels. He wasn't naïve enough to think this was the start of some grand new galaxy-spanning alliance; that had been tried before, and beings always found new reasons to go to war with each other. He hoped, at least, it would bring peace for a time, not just because the galaxy needed it, but because he didn't want to leave his friends in the lurch while he went off on some quest of self-discovery.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Voort asked, as gently as the Gamorrean's mechanical voice would allow.

"I am," he said firmly. Almost apologetically, he added, "I understand it's your decision, as my commanding officer, so if you don't want to accept my resignation I understand. Especially after we lost Trey and Thaymes."

Voort grunted wordlessly and watched a shuttle slip out of the hangar and vector toward *Corusca Gem*. He'd had a chance to talk with the rest of the Wraiths since the battle, and he could tell that the jubilation of victory had been tempered by the loss of two of their own. Scut found himself guiltily wishing he could hear Thaymes' stupid attempts at humor one more time.

After the shuttle disappeared into *Gem's* yawning hangar bay, Voort said, "We're not exactly the most formal unit. Technically, we don't even exist. If you were to go down to Zonama Sekot, I wouldn't even have the official capacity to stop you."

"I know, but I wanted your permission."

Voort watched at him with small, black eyes. "Is it because of me in any way?"

"Not at all," Scut shook his head emphatically. "We got over our problems a long time ago. This is about me and me alone. I've already commed my parents and talked to them about it. They said it's a great opportunity that I shouldn't pass up. The potential for biological research on Zonama Sekot is amazing. On a personal level, well, it's something else entirely."

"You're lucky, finding a place where you're comfortable," Voort said with a touch of envy.

"I'm not comfortable there at *all*. Their religious rites are still grotesque, the warriors are terrifying, the bio-tech blows my mind, and there's this shaper... Well, forget about her. *Comfortable* isn't the right word. *Belong* isn't either."

"Then what?" Voort asked. Scut heard curiosity in his mechanical voice.

"It's a place I can explore, and discover new things. It makes me feel young again."

"You're not old," Voort interjected. "*I'm* old. I hate it when young people say they're old, and so will you, once you *actually* get old."

"Okay, okay," Scut waved him off. "The point is, being a Yuuzhan Vong in the Alliance was weird, and hard sometimes. Being an Alliance member among Yuuzhan Vong is going to be a different kind of weird. I can't say if it's going to be better or worse."

"I bet it's exciting, though."

"Yes," He chuckled. "I won't deny that."

"Then you can have your honorable discharge," Voort's lips curved around his tusks into something close to a smile. "Do you want to tell the others or should I?"

"I'll tell them myself," he said. "I want to... explain my reasons for leaving them."

"They're your unit, Scut. You won't have to."

"You're probably right. Still, I'm sorry for leaving you another man short, sir. I know it can be hard finding new people, especially for a squad like ours."

"We'll be fine," Voort waved a green hand. "That's why I'm still with the Wraiths. There's always new faces. They keep me young."

The landing field outside the village was busy again. Shuttles mechanical and organic set down, unloaded people or took on cargo, then hopped in the air again. They rose into a sky that was impeccably clear and blue. The air was getting hotter and more humid, apparently an effect of Zonama Sekot drawing closer to its new sun. The forest around the village valley gleamed and glimmered every time the warm wind blew. It caressed his bare face and tussled his gray hair.

Venku leaned on the fence and watched the scene. It was strangely relaxing to watch other people act busy when you had nothing to do yourself.

As a *Mando*, he'd been raised to play hard when he wasn't fighting hard, but *Mando* play was always group play. He'd liked to go wandering through the forests outside Kyiromorut when he could, but sooner rather than later, somebody would always drag him back for some raucous warriors' celebration of being alive.

A part of him wanted to stay on this planet. It had unlocked parts of him he'd almost forgotten about, and shown him facets of the Force that he'd never bothered to learn. What he'd thought of all his life as an extra tool held potential he'd never dreamed of. It offered him a glimpse at a universe that was much bigger than any being could imagine.

But he was no Jedi, and he never would be. He was what Gotab, *Kal'ba'buir*, and the others had made him: a Mandalorian warrior, through and through. It didn't matter if he could unlock all the mysteries of the cosmos with his magical powers; if it didn't help his family, it wasn't worth a damn.

Going forward, he might try and touch the Force more often. He might try to take a look at the bigger universe from time to time, and find wisdom to guide his actions. He had the Force, whether he wanted it or not. It would be a shame to waste its resources.

He hoped his mother understood, wherever she was.

He didn't need to feel her touch anymore, or speak with Gotab. They didn't seem to be volunteering their presence anyway, and that was okay with him. When he left this planet he would have to get along without their guidance. The thought made him feel alone, but also strangely brave.

When Jaina Solo settled along the fence next to him, he didn't have to look to know she was there. Chalk one up for the Force.

"Do you want his lightsaber back?" she asked without greeting.

He glanced at her and saw one arm in a sling and band-aids over one cheek. There were two metal cylinders hanging from her belt: her own and Gotab's. He touched his mother's sabers, hanging off his own, and said, "I've only got two hands. Besides, I think he'd want you to have it."

"Thanks," she said. "I kind of wanted to keep it."

"You want to learn how to double-wield?"

She shook her head. "I'll stick with one at a time, thanks."

He wondered why she was still carrying around two sabers, then, but she asked, "Where are the others?"

"They're all up in orbit, getting ready to go back to Mandalore. I'm going with them. I just wanted to come down here one more time to say goodbye."

"To me, the planet, or someone else?"

He shrugged. When she didn't respond, he turned and looked at her again. It was hard to read the expression on her battle-damaged face, so he touched her with the Force. He sensed great weariness, and a sadness that would never go away, but

she also felt calm in a way he'd never known her to be. Whenever his paths had crossed with Jaina Solo, she'd been in the midst of one crisis or another, and usually wracked between her Jedi sense of duty and her human conscience.

He didn't ask what had happened. Even if she told him the whole story, he doubted he would understand it all. He'd heard nothing about Jacen Solo since the battle, but then, he'd only heard about him before the battle from Jaina herself. The woman clearly hadn't been lying to him, and he didn't doubt Zonama Sekot's ability to perform miracles. He could gather that they'd succeeded in their mission, that Jacen Solo was gone, and that Jaina wanted to keep the true story of what had happened quiet.

Some miracles were best kept secret. He hadn't told any of his *vode* about Gotab and his mother, and he probably never would.

So instead of asking for a blow-by-blow of the climactic battle, he said, "What are you going to do now?"

Jaina didn't answer. She looked away from the landing field and down toward the village. Its streets were a busy tussle of beings: Yuuzhan Vong, Ferroan, human, Chiss, and plenty other aliens. The natives were probably rankling at the sudden influx of visitors and probably just wanted everyone to leave so they could have their planet back. Venku never thought he'd sympathize with any *vongese*, but he did just then. That was a miracle too, albeit a small one.

Finally, Jaina said, "I've talked a little with Jag. We think there might be work for us. I need to talk to Uncle Luke once we get back into known space."

"What kind of work?"

She glanced at him, a sly smile slanted on her face. "Plugging me for information on the Jedi Order? I don't like the thought of that."

"It was just a question," he sighed. He couldn't blame her for the jibe, though. Jedi and *Mandos* had been enemies for centuries, something he'd found no problem with until a few days ago.

"What are *you* going to do?" she asked. "I heard you've got your antidote. You can go home."

"That's right." He thought of walking through the forests outside Kyrimorut, sitting down at the *Oyu'baat* for ale and good company, strutting through the streets of Keldabe. He'd almost gotten used to his exile, but now he couldn't wait to get back.

"What will you do once you get your people home?" she asked cautiously. They'd been Venku and Jaina for a second, but now they were back to *Mando* and *Jeti*.

"What do you think I'll do?" he asked, intentionally harsh. "Round up all our tough boys, fly over to Ossus, and start shooting up Jedi?"

"I don't know," she said plainly. "When Jag told me about the deal he made with Boba Fett, a part of me didn't want him to go through with it. The Mandalorians have given the Jedi a lot of trouble recently and having their *Mand'alor* back would strengthen them."

"Not *my* people," he said firmly. "That was Fett getting in bed with Daala, and Beviin playing along. I've always said we should stay at home and stop fighting wars for other people. I think that's truer now than ever."

"Then you don't think of the Jedi as your enemies?" He could hear it in her voice, curiosity and need.

"I don't know. What do you think of us?"

She sighed. "What I feel is all kinds of complicated, and you know it. I'm grateful for how you've helped me, here and four years back. I don't know if I'd call us friends exactly, but I don't think we're enemies. I don't *want* to be."

"Neither do I," he admitted.

"Well, I guess that's a start. They say it takes two people to go to war."

"I hope we're done with wars for a while."

"Sounds like you really *do* want your people to go out of business."

"I'm an old man, Solo. Not as ancient as *Mer'ika* or your *buir*, or our beloved *Mand'alor*, but still pretty old. I want to bring my family together and spend time with them before I kick it."

"Hmmm. You sound like Fett."

"Please, don't," he groaned.

"I heard he got into the fray up there, and helped save *Phoenix*. And now the *Mand'alor* is going back home."

"He's not going back to lead his people, and everybody knows it."

He wanted to sound bitter about it, but he'd spent most of his life hoping Jango Fett's kid would grow some *gett'se* and live up to his father's legacy. He understood now that Fett was too old to change, and he had a hard time hating a man who ultimately wanted to same thing he did.

"Well," Jaina said, "Hopefully that *will* mean quiet for a while."

Venku sighed. "How about a deal, Jedi? We'll stay on Mandalore if you stay on Ossus. Guaranteed we won't knock heads that way."

"I doubt either of those is going to happen."

"Yeah, me neither. But I can try."

"You should. If you and Fett both want the same thing, people might actually listen."

"Maybe. If there's one thing every *Mando* understands, it's family, whether it's a whole clan or just one person."

A wistful look came over her. It echoed through the Force. He knew she wouldn't tell him all her secrets, and frankly he didn't want to know, but he figured they were a close enough for a little honesty.

He asked, "Was he okay in the end?"

Jaina closed her eyes, let the wind blow and dark hair tickle her face. She took a deep breath, opened them again, and said, "Yes. He was."

Venku felt a spike of envy. He didn't let himself think about his father often, but when he did, it was always with an ache of regret for mistakes he could never rectify. After everything he'd gone through on Zonama Sekot, there was some pains he'd still have to live with. At least now, he had the healing memory of his mother's touch.

"It's the past now," he muttered, mostly to himself.

"You're right," Jaina nodded. "I feel like... I'm looking ahead of me now. Not over my shoulder. I haven't felt like that in... a very long time."

Though his ghosts had not been given flesh before his eyes, Venku had found the same feeling settling over him over the past few days.

He didn't tell her, but he knew she understood.

Tahiri pirouetted on one toe and snapped her opposite leg into a chest-high kick. She lowered her leg, skipped back two steps, and raised her lightsaber to block. At the same time, she willed the amphistaff curled around her arm to snap out like a whip. Then she lunged forward, thrusting her saber up high and her amphistaff down low.

She froze with one leg bent, one outstretched, her body pitched forward and her weapons thrust into empty air.

Then she drew her body straight, let the weapons fall to her side, and looked up at the tree-branches spanned out above her head. The forest around her was silent except for the chatter of rustling bora leaves. The air was getting more hot and humid, and her workout had left her sweating.

She let go of the amphistaff, and it obediently curled up on the forest floor. She clipped her lightsaber at her belt, went over to the fallen log where she'd left her pack, and fetched her canteen. The cool water felt exquisite as it dropped into her gut.

She felt a familiar presence and turned to see three figures walking toward her across the shadow-dappled forest floor. Jaina was in the lead, and Danni and Harrar were behind her.

"We knew you were out here somewhere," Danni said. "You took a little finding."

"I wanted to be alone to practice," Tahiri said. She planted her fists on her hips and asked, "What's going on?"

"I'm going to be going up to *Starless* soon," Jaina said. "I don't know if I'll be coming back down before we leave."

"Oh," Tahiri frowned. "I haven't changed my mind, if that's what you were wondering."

"I wasn't," Jaina said.

Tahiri knew she was telling the truth. When they talked the day after the battle, she'd explained to both Jaina and Ben that she felt more at home on Zonama Sekot than anyplace else she'd ever been. In all honesty, things had started to go

downhill for her the moment she left the living world to join the other Jedi at Qoribu, all those years ago.

To their credit, neither Ben nor Jaina had been the least bit surprised.

"*This* time we won't run the risk of getting lost," Danni told Jaina. "We've repaired the long-range transceiver *and* installed a back-up. Plus, the Alliance will be keeping one capital ship in orbit at all times. So you have no excuse for not tracking us down and visiting us every now and then."

"Don't worry, we'll see each other again," Jaina smiled warmly. It felt good, seeing Jaina smile like that. "Does Sekot plan on hopping around the stars any more?"

Danni gave a little sigh. "Sekot does what Sekot wants. But I think we're done moving around for a while. Using that hyperdrive is never easy."

"Doesn't it seem a little risky though?" Tahiri asked "I mean, right now we have people from the Jedi, Empire, Alliance, and Chiss Ascendancy, all in orbit. They all know the planet's location. I'm sure they'll keep it a secret, but that knowledge is going to be out there. There's still people like Daala and Aref'ja around."

"There is a risk to any action," Harrar said. "Right now, we believe it is best for us to remain where we are."

"It's your choice," Jaina said with a tone saying she disapproved.

"It's the planet's choice," Danni corrected her. "We just have to trust Sekot."

"Trust," Jaina repeated. She looked up at the tree-branches and felt the breeze wind around the scattered trunks.

"I trust Sekot," Tahiri said. "Maybe more than anything else."

"I'm glad," Jaina said. "If you trust it, so I do."

Jaina stepped forward for an embrace. Tahiri returned her tight hug while carefully avoided Jaina's left arm in its sling.

She whispered in her friend's ear, "Stay strong Jaina."

When Jaina pulled back, Tahiri was surprised to see a slanted Solo smile on her face. "Don't worry about me. I'll be okay from now on, I promise."

Jaina moved her hands onto Tahiri's shoulders and held them there. "Listen, Tahiri, there's one more thing before I go."

“What is it?”

Jaina hesitated, then looked over her shoulder at Danni and Harrar. “You guys can head back to the village. I’ll catch up.”

“Are you certain?” asked Harrar.

“I can find my way, don’t worry.”

“All right,” said Danni, “We’ll see you back at the landing field.”

“Sure. I won’t be long.”

Jaina waited and watched as the Magister and the old priest disappeared into the forest. By then, Tahiri was both curious and a little unsettled.

She asked, “Jaina, what is it? It is about Jacen?”

Jaina took her hands off Tahiri’s shoulders and wandered slowly toward the fallen log where she’d placed her bag.

She said, “Yes, but not the way you mean. Before he... died again, he asked me to do something for him.”

“What’s that?”

Jaina reached into her bag and pulled out a lightsaber. It was a battered old metal cylinder and Tahiri had never seen it before.

“Is that from one of the Sith you fought?” Tahiri asked. Jaina and Ben both had already explained everything about the fight, and about the sacrifices Jacen and Vestara had both made to defeat Darth Krayt.

Jaina thumbed the switch and a glowing emerald blade shot up into the air. She held it vertically between them and said, “This was the lightsaber Darth Krayt was using at the end. It’s what he... stabbed Jacen with.”

Tahiri frowned. She knew that Jaina had kept using the weapon she killed Caedus with as a kind of reminder of what she’d done. It had always stuck Tahiri was very grim and self-punishing. She still had that one dangling off her belt next to the dead Mandalorian’s weapon, and if she was going to also haul around the *other* saber that killed her brother, well, that was more grimness that seemed at odds with the lighter, more confident Jaina she’d seen over the past few days.

“This wasn’t always Krayt’s,” Jaina said. “When Jacen was dying, he sent me images about what he wanted me to do with it. I think you can help me fill in the missing pieces.”

"I don't understand. What can I do?"

"From what I gathered from Jacen, Darth Krayt was the son of a Jedi. A *Tusken* Jedi named Sharad Hett. Does that ring any bells?"

Tahiri thought back to the conversation she'd had with a clan of Tuskens during her and Ben's trip to Tatooine. That mission seemed an eternity ago.

"I do remember something," she said. "There's a legend among the Tuskens about Jedi who came from offworld, married a Tusken woman, and fought for their clan. I think the story says that he was killed fighting for his people against the Hutts."

"Go on," Jaina said.

Tahiri hadn't said there was anything more to the story, but apparently Jaina already knew parts of it. She said, "According to what I heard, the dead Jedi had a son. The son went offworld to become a Jedi himself, and when he came back he fought with the Tuskens again. Then one day he disappeared, and none of his people knew what happened to him."

"Did you ever hear his name?"

She could tell from Jaina's eyes that she already knew. "The father was Sharad Hett. The son was A'Sharad."

Jaina exhaled. "He was driven off the planet. He had one hand cut off by—"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," Tahiri finished.

Jaina shut off the lightsaber. "I think this belonged to Sharad Hett."

Tahiri didn't know what to say. There were a lot of weapons with long histories. Anakin's golden blade had been made at the academy, remade with a Yuuzhan Vong lambent, lost at Myrkr, found and used by Ganner Rhysode to defend the Well of the World Brain, wielded by Shimmra during the fall of Yuuzhan'tar, and finally left on Kashyyyk as part of Chewbacca's memorial. This weapon, though, was something else. Tahiri couldn't begin to imagine all it had been through over nearly a century.

"What does he want you to do with it?"

"I'm not sure exactly," Jaina admitted. "But I think he wants me to put an old ghost to rest."

"That sounds like a good idea," Tahiri said. "You can't be looking over your shoulder forever. Sometimes you have to admit you've lost things and move on."

"That's right," Jaina said, and put the saber back in her pocket. "Are you sure you'll be okay here?"

Tahiri craned her neck back and looked at sunlight falling through the trees. "Pretty positive. But come back and visit more often. Bring Allana, too. I bet she'd love this place."

"Her father did," Jaina said, calmly, without sadness or regret. "I'll see you again, Tahiri."

"I look forward to it." She stepped forward and gave Jaina one more hug.

When Jaina stepped back, she gave Tahiri one more wave goodbye and headed back toward the village along the path Danni and Harrar had taken.

Tahiri watched her go. When she had disappeared, Tahiri felt a dim sensation through the Force. She didn't have to wonder what it was. Tahiri turned around and saw herself sitting casually on the log next to her pack.

The Tahiri looking back at her was fifteen years younger. Her face was smoother and thinner, though the scars on her forehead remained. Her green eyes were full of regret and pain, but also curiosity and bright hope. She looked up at her older self as if expecting some miracle or great revelation.

"Isn't it time to move on?" Tahiri asked.

"Very well," Sekot said, and in the blink of an eye the living world had taken the form of Danni Quee. This new blond woman remained seated on the log, one leg crossed over the other. She looked at Tahiri as if requesting judgment.

Tahiri crossed her arms over her chest. "Don't let the *real* Magister catch you looking like that. She wouldn't like it."

"Don't worry," said the planet, "I can be discreet."

Tahiri wasn't so sure about that, but she asked, "Well, did you get what you wanted in the end?"

"What I wanted?" Sekot repeated.

"Yes. There must have been something you wanted out of all this mess. Did you get it?"

"Did you, Tahiri Veila?" an enigmatic smile played on Danni's lips.

"Did I?" She looked around the forest, felt the breeze on her face, and smelled the rank of life being decayed and reborn. She felt fully a part of it in a way she'd never felt at one with the Jedi Order, or any other order she'd belonged to. "Yes, I think I did."

"Then that's all that matters."

Tahiri walked closer to the log and noticed the light breeze playing with Danni's blond curls. She asked, "Are you here, physically? Do you have actual form right now?"

Danni's head nodded.

Tahiri took the lightsaber off her belt and tossed it. Sekot fumbled and caught it against Danni's chest. Its confused expression looked astonishingly authentic.

"Can you use that?"

Sekot awkwardly thumbed the lightsaber. A blue spear of light stabbed outward. Its glow reflected on Danni's face.

"Well," said Tahiri, "Not bad."

She reached out one arm and called the amphistaff to her. The creature leaped off the forest floor, spiraled around her arm, and extended half of itself past her hand in a stiff line.

"You want me to... spar with you?" Danni's face was confused.

"Why not? If you can build yourself a body you might as well do something with it. Next time you run into some crazy Sith Lords from Tatooine, it might do you some good. Besides, I like to practice with an opponent."

Sekot looked at the lightsaber with distaste. "This is a weapon. I don't like weapons. I've taken enough lives lately."

"It's a weapon," Tahiri agreed. "And it's a tool. It can even be used for healing, if you know how to do it right."

Sekot rose from the log and stepped closer to Tahiri. It held up the lightsaber in two unsteady hands and its expression was exactly what Danni Queen's would have been in the same situation.

"Come on," Tahiri hefted her amphistaff, "Let's try something new."

The sun was going down over Galactic City and the lights were coming up. Outside the window of Garik Loran's office, you could see countless lights burning in countless windows of countless spires, while the headlights of moving air-speeders formed a luminous grid suspended amidst the skyscrapers.

Every time you looked away and looked back a thousand tiny things had changed, but the great planet-city moved on as it had for thousands of years.

Syal didn't think she'd have missed Coruscant, but she had. There was something comforting in its timeless bustle. You could lose your worries in its ordered frenzy, and take comfort in how small your problems were when piled along those of a trillion other beings.

For the moment, her troubles were small indeed. Certainly, compared to all she'd been through over the past few weeks, delivering a thorough report to her superiors was as trivial as it could get.

"Finally," she said as she wrapped things up, "The repair yards at Rothana say they'll give the communications systems on *Starless* a complete refit with updated systems, so as to avoid another ill-timed malfunction."

"How long will those refits take?" Admiral Bwa'tu asked from his seat next to Loran's desk.

"An additional four days, sir." Syal put her datapad on the desk. "May I ask if you have new missions planned?"

Bwa'tu glanced at Loran, and the human picked up Syal's datapad and scrolled through the information. As he read, Loran said, "We believe we may have further uses for *Star-*

less, and for her captain, but right now we're giving you and your crew some downtime."

Syal certainly wouldn't mind a vacation. She tried not to let her relief show and asked, "How long will we be on furlough, sirs?"

"That depends on several things, including how Chief of State Dorvan's talk with the Chiss delegation is going," Loran said. "When you do get your next assignment, it's quite likely I'll be sending along some old friends. Is that okay with you, Piggy?"

Syal glanced over her shoulder. After spilling out her whole mission report she'd almost forgotten the big green-skinned Gamorrean and the old white-furred Bothan standing behind her.

"We'll go wherever you send us, Face," Voort said, "But I'm down three after that last mission. It's going to take some work to bring the squadron up to full manpower."

"I understand. Wraiths are always hard to replace," Loran said, a little sadly. He put the datapad on the desktop and shifted his attention to Kre'fey. "Do you have any thoughts about our offer, Admiral?"

"I appreciate it, but I'm no admiral, just an old Bothan." Kre'fey shook his head. "I especially appreciate it from you, Admiral Bwa'tu. I know our politics have often been at odds, but I want you to know I have the utmost respect for you as an officer."

Bwa'tu inclined his head. "You've done our people proud, Admiral."

"Well," said Loran, "if you won't take a position as instructor at the academy, can I ask what you'll be doing?"

"Retirement," Kre'fey said with finality. "This recent... adventure has reminded me of everything I loved and hated about commanding a starship. While there's a certain thrill involved, I'm tired of losing people important to me. I'm also tired of nearly dying. From here on, I am leaving the naval derry-doing to the young."

"Will that be necessary?" Syal spoke up, a little awkwardly.

"Are you asking if we see stormclouds on the horizon?" Loran raised an eyebrow. Syal nodded.

"For the moment, no," Bwa'tu answered. "But there's always things to keep an eye on, especially if the Chiss are coming in from the cold and getting more involved in galactic affairs."

"I heard they're setting up a consulate with the Empire," Voort said. "Any news about getting one here?"

"That is what Dorvan is speaking to the Fels about right now," said Loran. "We'll just have to wait and see how that plays out."

"The Empire is in an interesting place right now," Kre'fey observed. "Daala and most of her hard-liners are dead. Vitor Reige's position looks more secure than ever. Thankfully, he does not seem to be in the expansionist mood."

"We're lucky for that," Loran said. "The recent... rumors about a new Yuuzhan Vong War displayed a lot of discontent within the Alliance member worlds."

"We heard there were riots," Syal said.

"Some," Loran admitted, "But most of them were quieted down by Dorvan himself. He went on all the holo-networks and explained the situation, including the joint fleet sent out to investigate. It calmed people's nerves."

"Telling the truth does that," Bwa'tu said. "Politicians should try it more often."

"Wyn is a rare breed," Loran said. "However, it's not all over. Some people are going to make a martyr out of Daala. Polls say approval ratings are already three times what they were when she was Chief of State."

"Three times zero is still zero," Voort grunted.

Bwa'tu's fur rippled angrily, and Syal remembered rumors that he and Daala had been close. Well, she supposed somebody was bound to mourn the old hawk-bat.

"What about Bren?" Kre'fey asked, a little tremor in his voice. "Are my people making him into a martyr also?"

"That's complicated," Loran sighed. "Some Bothans are claiming you had him executed for treason, then said he died in action. Some say he never died at all and that he's still got a ship out there hunting Vong, even though his body's being shipped back to Bothawui as we speak."

"I will talk to my connections in Drev'starn," Kre'fey said. "I will make sure the truth is told."

"What truth is that?" asked Bwa'tu.

Kre'fey's violet eyes went hard. "That Bren Aref'ja made some mistakes, but he was a brave officer who died defend-ing his crew."

Nobody knew what to say to that. The old Bothan had spoken with conviction that was impossible to shake. Syal doubted she, or anyone else, could change his mind about his friend. And, perhaps, none of them should.

Loran broke the awkward silence. He slapped a hand on his desk and said, "Well, I believe our time is about up. I know that I have places to be."

"Very well," Bwa'tu said, and rose from his chair. "Ah, Admiral Kre'fey, may I ask your plans for the evening?"

"I was planning to turn in early," Kre'fey said guardedly. "My transport to Bothawui leaves at dawn."

"Going so soon?" Loran asked.

"I'd like to get back to my retirement. I have not missed Coruscant, though maybe next year I will be back for the armistice anniversary on *Ralroost*."

"The whole navy would appreciate that," Bwa'tu said. "If you have the time, however, I'd like to invite you to the Krem'tya."

"The Krem'tya?" The Bothan's white ears flattened on his skull. "They haven't shut that dive down in all this time?"

"It's as popular with Bothan officers as ever." Bwa'tu bore his fangs in the equivalent of a welcoming smile. "I know many would like to meet you."

Kre'fey's fur rippled in agitation or embarrassment, Syal couldn't tell. He said, "All right, but not for long."

"Don't worry, Admiral. I'm sure it's just the same as you left it."

The two Bothans headed out first, side-by-side in an awkward attempt at comradeship. When the door closed behind them Loran blew a long breath and said, "Ever been to a party with a bunch of drunken Bothan sailors?"

"No," Voort said, "And I never, *ever* want to."

"Then it's good that we have plans." Loran looked right at Syal. "Captain, you can lead the way."

"Me?" she blinked. "I was going to go back to my apartment and sleep."

A look passed between Loran and Voort, some weird mix of embarrassment and amusement.

“What?” she pressed. Her parents are staying there too. They usually do when they come in from Corellia. “What did Mom and Dad do?”

Loran sighed and placed a heavy on her shoulder. “You’ve got to keep an eye on those old folks, Syal. Give them free reign and they’ll invite all their friends for a party.”

“They?” Voort deadpanned.

“Okay, *we*,” Loran shrugged. “Dia’s already there, so we should get moving. She hates it when I’m late.”

“My parents are throwing a party at my place,” Syal had to say the words out loud to believe them. “A *party*.”

“Yup.” Loran patted her shoulder. “Sorry, Captain, but you’re not getting much rack time tonight.”

Jesmin decided that it was a sign of maturity that she could drink with her parents. She didn’t want to consider what *else* it might signify, so she left it at that.

She was wedged between Kell and Tyria Tainer on one of the sofas in Syal Antilles’ apartment. The three of them were sharing a bottle of some Corellian wine that Syal’s parents had brought. The room was full of warmth and noise: Winter Celchu was in the kitchen, talking with the Quarren pilot Nrin Vakil and his Twi’lek wife Koyi Komad. Gavin Darklighter and his wife, Sera Faleur, were sitting at the living-room table and talking to Mirax Horn and Dia Passik. Corran Horn had grabbed a chair from the table and scooted it over to the sofa so he could hear Jesmin recount her adventures.

“I’ve got to say I’m impressed,” her mother said. “I did a lot of stuff with the Wraiths, but I never got to fight Sith or spin lightsabers with any Mandalorian Jedi.”

“He’s wasn’t a Jedi, just a Jedi’s kid.” Jesmin said. “Kind of like me, I guess.”

Tyria draped an arm over her shoulder. “Did it feel any different when you were on Zonama Sekot?”

Jesmin shook her head. “Not really. Not like what you and Doran talked about. I guess I really don’t have it in me. I mean, I already pretty much knew, but...”

"There's no shame in that," Corran said.

"I'm not ashamed. A little disappointed, maybe." Jesmin shrugged. "There was only one time when I *really* touched the Force, the way you guys talk about. It was... well, it's a long story, but I made it count."

"That's all anybody can ask for," her mother said.

"What do you think you'll do now?" Kell asked.

She sipped some wine and gave him a tight smile. "Keep up the other family tradition, probably."

"Oh, great." Kell clapped his hands. "Want to learn about explosives?"

"Dad, no!" she slapped his knee. "I want to stay on with the Wraiths."

"You sure?" Tyria asked.

Jesmin nodded. "I talked it over with Myri. She wants to stay on too. And Loran probably needs us, since we lost a few people on the mission. Don't know what he'll need us *for*, but I'm sure something'll come up."

"Something always does."

"I think you and my namesake make a good team," Mirax said as she appeared over her husband's shoulder.

"Thanks," Jesmin smiled and glanced at the closed door to Syal's bedroom. "I hope she finishes... whatever she's doing in there."

"Family matters," Corran shrugged a little. "I'm sure they'll be done soon."

Mirax looked over her shoulder and called to Dia. "Hey, any idea when your husband's getting here?"

"He just buzzed me," the Twi'lek woman said. "He said he's on his way with Syal and Voort."

"About time," Kell said. "I haven't seen Face and Piggy in *ages*."

Tyria stretched her long limbs. "That's the shame about getting older. You see the people important to you less and less."

"At least they're still around," Mirax said. "There's too many of you flyboys- and girls- that stopped flying too soon."

"Too many to count," Gavin said as he and his wife stepped in. "Sometimes it gets hard to remember them all."

"Ugh," Jesmin groaned, "You old people are depressing. I hope Myri comes out soon."

"Just make sure to learn from your elders," Kell told her. "We have valuable wisdom to impart."

Tyria snorted.

"Oh, I think Jesmin will be fine," Corran said. "And Syal. Even Myri."

"*Even* Myri?" Jesmin said.

"Even Myri," he chuckled.

"Valin and Jysella are doing well now too, aren't they?" Gavin asked.

Corran nodded. "Running super-secret missions for Master Skywalker. Not even *I* get to hear about them."

"It shows Luke trusts them," Tyria said.

"I know. I'm not complaining at all. I'm happy for them. After everything they went through... I'm glad things turned out right."

"What are your boys up to?" Kell asked Gavin.

"One pilot, one civvie," he said. "So, following family business on both counts."

"They're all good kids," Sera hooked her arm around Gavin's. "No offense to Syal and Myri, but I'm glad I didn't fall for Wedge like my sister did."

"Your *sister* dated Wedge Antilles?" Tyria gogged.

Sera waved a hand dismissively. "Only once. A long time ago. Reina says there's not much to tell. She didn't even get to see his Ewok dance."

"A shame," Corran sighed. "He was surprisingly good at it."

Jesmin smirked and finished off her glass of wine. She wanted more, but was currently pinned down by a ring of old people and had to look toward the kitchen longingly. As talk of old times continued, Jesmin's attention wandered to the cracked bedroom door, and she wondered about her friend within.

"I only talked with her a few times. I didn't even like her. But she *died* for me," Myri said. She sat crosslegged on Syal's bed, staring at her hands in the dim light. "I wish I could have thanked her somehow."

They were arrayed around her, sitting on the edge of the bed or in chairs. Light and noise from the main room spilled through the half-open door, but the scene felt intensely private. She looked up from her hands and saw her father to the right, her mother to the left. Three more men leaned forward in their chairs to hear her: dignified white-haired Tycho Celchu, gaunt and bald Hobbie Klivian, and finally Wes Janson, whose grim expression clashed with his garish yellow-and-black suit and full head of shaggy gray hair.

All of them waited patiently to hear what else Myri had to tell them about Elscol Loro, but she couldn't think of anything more to say.

Her mother understood. Iella reached out and put her hand over Myri's. "Thank you for telling us."

"You all flew with her," Myri sniffed. "You deserve to know what happened to her."

Janson gave a long sigh. "The Elscol I remember was a hard-case. Very serious. Very grim. No sense of humor at all."

"Wes!" Klivian slapped his knee.

"She had every right to be grim" Janson continued. "She'd already lost a lot when I knew her, and I guess she lost more after that. She could be reckless, and stubborn, and a general pain-in-the-butt to work with—"

"Wes!" Tycho said.

"He's right," her father said gently. "We had a lot of tortured people in the Alliance, especially early on. But she fought heart and soul. I'm glad she found peace in the end."

"That's what I was getting at," said Janson.

"It still doesn't seem fair," Myri shook her head. "I don't want people dying for me."

"I understand that," Iella squeezed her hand harder. "But you gave Elscol something too, something I think she needed for a long, long time."

"What's that?"

"Elscol spent all her life fighting and destroying things," Wedge said. "You gave her a chance to *save* something."

Myri arched her neck back so she could stare at the ceiling. It wasn't going to be easy, living with the weight of Elscol Loro's life. The best she could do was keep trying to be worthy of it.

Iella asked, "Do you plan to stay with the Wraiths?"

"I do. I think I finally found something worth doing. People I want to be with."

"I'm glad. Just try to cut down on the risky missions."

Myri laughed. "I'll try mom, but I can't make promises."

"Life of a pilot," said Wedge.

"Life of a *spy*," his wife corrected.

"It's a little bit of both," Myri shrugged. She wiped a little moisture from her eyes and said, "Okay, enough acting mopey. Isn't there a party going on?"

"Oh right, that," Tycho said.

With a creak, Klivian rose on skinny legs, and Tycho and Janson followed.

"Are you okay, Hobbie?" Janson asked, "Did you break another bone?"

"That wasn't me, that was the chair."

"Are you sure? That sounded very bone-like."

"Wes, shut up and go get that Yellow Aces brandy," Tycho said.

"With pleasure."

The three old men pushed open the door and filed out, leaving Myri sitting on the bed with her parents. She could see the crowd filling up Syal's living room and asked them, "Think she'll be mad we crashed her apartment?"

"Well, I *tried* to get another place," said Wedge, "But I couldn't find anybody I could pull rank on."

"The kids don't know who you are these days, dear," Iella said.

"I know. I need to get in touch with whoever writes their history textbooks."

Myri giggled softly, uncrooked her legs, and sprung herself onto the floor. When she stepped out into the main room she was overwhelmed by noise, people, and the smell of wine and brandy. Tycho, Klivian, and Janson were making a bee-line to the kitchen counter, where Winter was talking with Nrin Vakil and Koyi Komad. Corran, Mirax, and Dia were seated at the kitchen table, sipping from their glasses and sharing amiable conversation. Gavin Darklighter and his wife, Sera, stood closer to the door. On the sofa with its back to the window,

Jesmin Tainer was squeezed between her parents. Not for the first time, Myri was struck by how much Jesmin resembled her mother.

“Skate!” Jesmin’s eyes lit up when she saw her friend. She quickly bounced off the sofa and hooked Myri by the arm. “Thank the *Force* you’re here. I’m surrounded by old people.”

“Don’t get cocky kid, it’ll happen to you too one day,” Kell called at her back.

“Come on, Skate, let’s get something to drink,” Jesmin pulled her over to the kitchen counter, where Janson was pouring out some amber-colored ale into three glasses.

“Two more, please,” Jesmin held up as many fingers.

“Sure, sure, always glad to share my delicacy,” Janson said, and fetched two glasses from the cupboard.

“*Your* delicacy?” Myri asked.

“Of course.” Janson shifted around the bottle to show off the label. It featured a cartoonish image of a man in an X-wing pilot’s helmet, grinning broadly and thrusting one thumb up, set against a yellow-and-black checkerboard backdrop.

Jesmin squinted at the label. “That *almost* looks like you.”

“Not old enough,” said Tycho.

“No *ugly* enough,” said Klivian.

“Oh, shut up, shut up,” Janson said as he poured two more glasses. “This is a very popular brand on Tanaab. I’m trying to get into the export market, but you know how crowded it is.”

“At least you’re productive in your waning years,” Nrin said from behind him.

“Always busy, that’s me.”

Myri and Jesmin took their glasses and sipped. It was strong, very strong, but had a uniquely sweet taste.

“Not bad,” she admitted.

“Great!” Janson clapped his hands. “Tell your friends about it. Tell them to *buy* it. I’m actually thinking of a new flavor called ‘Kettch’s Special’ or ‘Yub Yub Delight,’ or something like that.”

“Will it taste like engine fuel?” asked Nrin.

“I wanted to give it a cinnamon tang, actually-”

Tycho shook his head, mournful. “Won’t be authentic Rogue Squadron homebrew, then.”

"Well, I could always *add* some engine fuel..."

The door slid open and all conversation stopped. Everyone turned to look at Syal standing in the doorway, Face Loran and Voort SaBinring visible in the hallway behind her.

Syal froze and stared at her jam-packed apartment. Then she sighed and said, "I need a drink."

"You're in luck," Myri called. "C'mon, sis, over here."

Syal walked over to the kitchen counter, while Face and Piggy went over to the sofa. Syal looked at Myri and asked, "Was this your idea?"

"Nope," she shook her head. "All Daddy's."

She groaned. "I thought old people were supposed to be responsible."

Klivian nearly spit up his drink and Janson said, "I don't know where you *ever* got that idea. Here, have some Yellow Ace Brandy, my personal special."

"It's actually good," Jesmin piped.

"You bet it is," Janson handed a quarter-filled glass to Syal.

To Myri's surprise, her sister scooped it up and downed it on one gulp. She made a face, but held the glass out and said, "More, please."

Janson refilled Myri, Syal, and Jesmin's cups, finishing off the bottle. Apparently he'd brought a second, and he went off to go peddle his wares to the new arrivals, leaving the young-er women face each other.

"This is good," Jesmin said. "Now there's *three* of us."

"Three of what?" Syal asked.

"Not-old people," Myri said, and took another sip. The brandy was warm and went quickly to her head. She put her elbow on top of her sister's shoulder and leaned in close. "So, where'd you come from? High-level meeting with Face and Bwa'tu and Dorvan?"

"Just the first two," she said. "Dorvan's meeting the Chiss, apparently."

"Still, pretty fine company you keep," Jesmin said. "Not like us Wraiths. We get no appreciation at all."

"Yeah, it's terrible," Myri chimed.

"I think we need uniforms," said Jesmin. "With epaulets. And hats!"

Syal made a face. "Have you been at this for a while?"

"This is not my first drink," Jesmin admitted. "Or my second. Or third."

She sighed. "This is why I don't like showing up to parties late."

"You never go to parties at all," Myri said. "We've got to work on that. I know this great place, it's called Ricochet. We should go there sometime."

She stared at her sister, fully expecting her to say no. But instead Syal gave a sloppy, tipsy shrug and said, "I'm on leave for a little bit, so why not?"

"Hey Jezzie, you should come too," Myri giggled, "By the way, what's it like using the Force when you're drunk?"

"I can barely use it when I'm sober. Go ask Corran or my mom."

Myri turned to do just that when the door slid open again, and once more the entire room fell to a hush. Jagged Fel stepped through the doorway first. He was dressed in a dark suit, and still wore a patch over his right eye. Behind him was a bigger, older man looking so very similar, right down to the eyepatch, though Baron Fel was dressed in the black uniform of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet. While Jagged's black hair bore only one white streak rising from the scar on his forehead, his father's was a peppered mix of gray and white.

"Soontir!" someone bleated. Myri looked to see her father standing by the door to Syal's bedroom with his jaw hanging wide. Myri noticed Tycho and Hobbie, both Fel's former students, with similarly slack-open mouths.

The old baron nodded in Wedge's direction, and took another step into the room.

Wynssa Fel appeared behind his back. The blonde woman was also dressed in the black uniform of the Chiss. She held her back stiff and surveyed the party like it was a battle scene.

Finally, another woman stepped into the room. She wore a plain jacket and long dark skirt, formally cut. Her hair, blond fading to white, was gathered at the back of her neck. Her face was thinned and wrinkled by time, but billions of holo-play fans across the galaxy would recognize the aging grace of Wynssa Starflare.

The original Syal Antilles.

She looked at her brother. The thin smile on her face was happy and sad at the same time.

"Hello, Wedge," she said. "It's good to see you again."

Myri blinked, and suddenly they were in each other's arms. The entire apartment was silent as death: All eyes were on the old man and the old woman, wrapped in the tightest hug they could manage, burying their faces in each other's shoulders and crying silent tears.

It had been over half a century since they had seen each other. Their lives had split apart when they were children, and touched only indirectly a few times during the war with the Empire. Myri knew her father had given up on seeing his sister a long, long time ago. For her aunt, the experience had probably been even more tumultuous. Wedge and Syal didn't even try to speak. Myri knew no words could do their feelings justice.

Myri slid an arm around her own sister's waist. Syal didn't try to move it. They just watched the reunion in silence, just like everybody else.

Finally, Wedge picked his head off his sister's shoulder. He looked around until he found Iella, and held out a hand. "Syal, this is my wife. Iella."

"I'm glad to finally meet you," Myri's aunt smiled.

Iella had her hand over her hung-open mouth. She managed to nod.

"And these are... these..." Wedge spun dizzily around the room, tailed off. Myri gave a little cough to gain his attention but he didn't notice.

"This is my family," her father said. "All of them. These people are *all* our family."

The balcony to Syal Antilles' apartment was small and narrow, but Jagged Fel and his father were able to squeeze onto it. Cool wind rushed between skyscrapers, and Jag was grateful for it. He barely had anything to drink, but he needed it nonetheless to clear his head.

His mother, uncle, and aunt had retreated to the bedroom to talk privately, but otherwise the party continued as loudly as

ever. His father had just removed himself from a conversation with Tycho Celchu and Nrin Vakil.

Light, warmth, and noise spilled over their backs; beyond the railing on which they leaned was a drop miles deep through the night. Behind them, Myri Antilles had grabbed up Wynssa and his mother talked with Wedge and Iella while the others left them a respectful distance.

For a while, Jag and his father watched the lights of the Galactic City's skyline in silence and slowly sipped the brandy Wes Janson had forced on them. It was, Jag admitted, quite good, though a little strong for his taste.

Even with the brandy loosening his nerves, he still found it hard to talk to his father. He always had. Growing up, Baron Soontir Fel had always been a stern figure in a black uniform. He'd never doubted that his father loved him, but when he'd needed to vent his feelings, he'd always done it to his mother. He knew his father *would* have listened if he'd talked, but he'd always been afraid of disappointing the high standards the baron held all his children to.

So, as father and son leaned against the railing and watched the luminous Coruscant night, it was the baron who asked, "Have you told your wife yet?"

"I have. She's agreed to come with me to Bastion. I'm not sure how she feels about being an ambassador's wife, but she's agreed. Reige has some ideas, though. He's talked about setting up Imperial Missions to do outreach and charity work in other parts of the galaxy. He thinks it can be a peaceful, positive way to expand the Empire's influence."

"I did a mission with her father once," the baron recalled. "I'm sure he hates the idea."

"Jaina does what Jaina wants to. Probably takes after her father, at least in that respect. She generally doesn't care what her parents think, or anybody else."

"And her husband?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

His father made a neutral hum, but it felt like disapproval. Jag reached up with his free hand and touched the black patch over his eye. The skin on his face was still sensitive, and stung under the slightest pressure.

"Why didn't you ever get a replacement?" he asked his father. "With a prosthetic eye you could have flown again."

"By the time I lost it I was already getting older. My reflexes were failing. Besides, I had other ways to serve."

Serve, yes. That had always been the optimal word with his father. When his siblings had died, one after another, they had always given their lives in *service*. He thought his mother must hate that word, deep down. When the baron said it, it always felt cold and cruel.

"Father," he said, "I want you to know that... I'm sorry. For all the problems I've given you. For being exiled and getting the family dishonored. I can't imagine all the difficulties you've had the past ten years and I know it was my fault, and I know I should have—"

"Don't," his father said sternly.

With great effort, he turned his gaze from the Coruscant night and looked at his father's face.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, "It's just that I know duty and service were always so important, and I betrayed those things. I got myself exiled, I married a Jedi, I left the Chiss and the Empire, I—"

"Don't," his father repeated. A hand squeezed his shoulder firmly. "You have nothing to apologize for, Jagged."

Jag blinked. "I... don't understand. I know I've let you down."

"You haven't," his father insisted. "Jag, how many governments do you think I served? How many masters?"

Jag swallowed. He hadn't expected to hear this.

"I had many masters. Palaptine. Pestage. Isoto. Isard. Even the Rebel Alliance. Grand Admiral Thrawn and his legacy. Finally, the Ascendancy. I changed allegiance many times, Jag, and do you know why?"

He shook his head dumbly.

The baron held up two fingers. "My honor was one reason. I wanted my talents to serve a leader who was worthy of it, and it took me a long time to find someone who was.

"Love was my other reason. I knew I could never be happy unless your mother was at my side."

He took his hand off his son's shoulder and looked out at the skyline. "I'm not disappointed in you, Jag. You've done

everything I would have done in your place. Every step of the way.”

Jag felt short of breath. His hands were shaking as he placed his glass on the top of the railing, lest he drop it. He bowed his head low and took long, deep breaths until his body and mind were calm.

When he looked up, his father was still staring at the distant city lights.

“I’m proud of you, Jag,” his father said, more softly than he’d heard the baron speak before. “I’m proud of all my children.”

There was a knock on the wall that spun them both around. Tycho Celchu was standing there, silhouetted against the light from the room. Over his shoulder, Jagged could see his mother and uncle talking to the Horns.

“If you two can spare a minute, we’re having a toast,” Tycho said.

“Of course,” the Baron nodded. “Go ahead, Jagged.”

Jag picked up his glass and walked back into the room. He could see that everyone had gathered in the main room. His mother, Wedge, Gavin, and the Horns were standing by the kitchen table. Kell, SaBinring, and Loran, were lined up against the interior wall. The three-person sofa was packed with Jesmin Tainer, both Antilles girls, and most amusingly Wynssa, who looked a little light-headed as Myri plied her with drinks, saying, “C’mon, cousin, we’re gonna get you *loaded*.”

Already entertained, Jag edged closer to the sofa and perched his backside on the armrest next to Jesmin, though none of the young ladies seemed to notice.

Meanwhile, Nrin, Koyi, Sera, Winter, and Hobbie Klivian were leaning on the kitchen counter. Dia, Iella, and Tyria stood by the wall by the bedroom. His father joined his mother, and both moved off to the side. The Horns joined the kitchen-counter crowd.

Finally, Janson was scampering around the loop as fast as his old joints allowed, topping off people’s glasses with the night’s third bottle of Yellow Aces brandy. Jag pretty was sure he had a fourth stashed away somewhere.

That left Wedge Antilles standing in the center of the room. When Janson had topped off the last cup he clanged a fork

against his near-empty brandy bottle until he'd gotten everyone's attention.

When all had gone silent, Wedge said, "I want to thank everyone for being here tonight. I just said that everyone in this room is family to me, and I meant that."

"Even Wes?" Klivian called.

"*Especially* Wes."

"Yub yub, commander," Janson raised his glass.

Wedge raised his glass over the laughter. "This isn't just a reunion. We have brave young people here today who just got back from a dangerous mission."

Myri and Jesmin gave a proud whoop. Syal soundlessly tipped her cup a little higher.

"Brave *old* people too," Kell said, and slapped Piggy's heavy shoulder.

"Okay, yes, we have all kinds of brave people in this room. People who still go out and risk their lives for what's right and just." He tipped his glass toward the sofa, almost spilling amber brandy. Then he raised the glass again and said, "A toast to every Rogue and Wraith, past, present, and future, especially the ones who've gone beyond."

Jesmin raised her glass. "To Thyames and Trey."

"To Elscol Loro," Myri said.

Klivian called, "To Dllr and Herrian."

"To Ibtisam," Nrin said softly.

Tyria raised her glass. "To Jesmin Ackbar."

Loran did the same. "To Ton Phannan."

"To Castin Donn," Dia added.

Kell said, "To Grinder and Falyn."

"To Bhindi and Runt," said Piggy.

"To Jek Porkins." Janson raised his bottle high.

Corran Horn raised his cup. "To Lujayne Forge and Tal'dira."

With equal gravity, Gavin said, "To Asyr and Biggs."

For a moment it seemed like everyone was done. Then Iella raised her glass and said, "To Diric."

Syal followed her mother's lead. "To Tiom."

"To Alderaan," said Tycho, and Winter squeezed his arm.

Jag's glass shot up. "To Davin. And-"

"Cheriss," Wynssa said, and lifted her wobbling cup.

“Chak,” said their father.

“Cem,” said their mother.

The room was silent again. Everyone’s glasses were in the air. Wedge Antilles looked across the room with a bitter-sweet expression. He was an old man now, wrinkled and white-haired. He’d fought a lifetime of battles and lost too many friends, but at the end of it all he found himself surrounded by people he loved and who loved him back, even people he’d long since given up hope of seeing again.

Jag could only hope his story would end so well.

Finally, Wedge raised his glass a little higher and said, “A toast to absent friends, and memory still bright.”

Everyone tipped their glasses higher, then brought them down again.

Just as quickly as it had fallen, the reverent mood lifted. Hobbie cracked a joke, and Janson cracked one back. Tycho rolled his eyes and Wedge shook his head. Myri cackled about something, Jag couldn’t hear what. He looked side-long at his parents. His mother was resting her head on the baron’s shoulder and wore a look of beatific calm. To Jag’s great surprise, his father was smiling too.

He took another drink of brandy and leaned back. He closed his eye, listened to the clamor, and felt warmth flow through him.

The only thing he was missing was Jaina, but he’d see his wife soon enough. As it was, tonight felt perfectly close to perfect.

The sun was slanting in the west, turning the sky shades of pink and red and lighting the thin strips of clouds a dazzling violet. Even the twinkling of light on water seemed to take a rosy hue.

Jaina Solo walked slowly along the beach, far enough away from the tide so that sand was white and dry. Her feet were bare and the ground tickled every step. A cool wind blew, carrying the first chill of evening and the taste of salt-spray.

Further down the beach, her parents were playing with Allana in the surf. Their granddaughter had much more energy than they did, but Han and Leia were doing their best to keep up. By now, wave after wave had soaked them up to the knees and their loose windbreakers flapped in the wind. Allana kept on trying to swim out into the ocean, and Leia kept on calling her back.

Jaina watched them with a soft smile on her face. Softly, she said, "I wish Jacen could have seen this."

Zekk and Tenel Ka was walking alongside her. Through the Force, she felt from them a reflection of her own feelings, a curious mixture of relief and lingering sadness.

"I'm glad you came to tell us this," Zekk said. "It's good to know what happened, first-hand."

"It's not something we're going to let get around," Jaina said. "What Sekot did... what *Jacen* did... Even Uncle Luke has never heard of anything like it. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd have never believed it. We're not even going to tell the Jedi Council. But you deserved to know."

"I... felt him, when he came back," Tenel Ka said slowly. "Allana did as well. I was very confused. And Allana was scared."

Jaina nodded grimly. Jacen's daughter only remembered her father as Caedus, and that memory had left a scar that would be with her the rest of her life. She wished more than anything that she could share with Allana the man her father had been before, and managed to be in the end: understanding and wise, thoughtful and ever-searching for a greater way to help others, not hurt them.

"We could only feel him vaguely," Tenel Ka continued. "I knew he was alive, somehow. I guessed it had something to do with your mission to find Zonama Sekot. I was frustrated, though, because all I could feel of him were tiny hints. I couldn't even tell if I was feeling Jacen again... or Darth Caedus."

"It was *Jacen*," Jaina said firmly. "In the end, it was him."

"I know," she continued. "Right before he... disappeared again he reached out to us both. I felt... so much regret. He was trying to tell us he was sorry, and that he loved us."

Tenel Ka stopped walking to watch her daughter. She hugged herself with one arm and said, "Allana was very scared at first. But she was sad when he was gone. I think... she understands now, as best as she ever will." She paused, then added, "As much as any of us ever can."

"I'm glad." Jaina felt something well in her throat. She was relieved Tenel Ka did not ask if she could come to Zonama Sekot to see Jacen again. To her, as well as Jaina herself, Jacen's last moments had felt like a final parting in the Force.

Tenel Ka exhaled and placed her hand on Jaina's shoulder. "Are you all right, friend Jaina?"

"As much as I'll ever be," she said. "What happened on Zonama Sekot... Well, I don't think I'll ever fully understand. But it gave me something I needed, something very important."

She didn't need to tell them what it was. It was the same thing they'd all needed: Tenel Ka, Zekk, Allana, her parents, Ben, Luke. Jacen most of all.

"So what happens now?" Zekk asked. "I've heard you're joining the Empire."

Jaina glanced at him. "Who told you *that*?"

"Oh please, Jaina. I'm an agent of the Hapan Royal Guard. There isn't a rumor in the galaxy I don't know about."

"It was Lowbacca, actually," Tenel Ka said.

"Oh yeah," Jaina said. "I commed him on my way here. He says his kid's due in a couple months."

"I can't wait for a big furry nephew," Zekk said.

She elbowed him in the side. "Yeah, once he grows up you can hold wrestling matches and roughhouse him."

"Sounds fun to me," Zekk laughed.

"So tell us, Jaina," Tenel Ka pressed, "What *are* you and Jagged going to be doing in the Remnant?"

"Well, after Jag proved his impeccable command and diplomatic multi-tasking skills with Trinity Fleet, he's been appointed liaison between the Chiss and the Remnant. He'll be working closely with the embassy they're setting up on Bastion."

"But what are *you* going to do, friend Jaina?"

"I've talked with Jag about that. And Uncle Luke. There's got to be a lot of people in Remnant space who have the Force and never had the opportunity to learn. I'll start by trying to find them."

"You mean the Empire is going to let you recruit Jedi?" Zekk sounded incredulous.

"Within limits," she admitted. "Reige sounds like he wants some... oversight over the whole thing."

"Be careful," Allana warned.

"I will." Jaina smiled down at her. "Plus I'm sure I'll help Jag on his liason duties."

"Does that mean you'll get to go to Csilla at some point and see the family?" asked Zekk.

"Maybe. I've already met some of them. The reception's been... a little chilly. But hopefully I can thaw things out now that they're going to be more involved in galactic affairs."

"Unlikely," said Zekk. "Csilla's a cold planet after all."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Glad I could help."

"What prompted the Chiss to change course?" Tenel Ka asked with the controlled, professional tone she used when making inquiries as Queen Mother.

"Well, Chiss internal politics tends to go over my head," she admitted, "But Jag says their participation in Trinity Fleet

brought the conflict between the isolationist and reformist factions to a head. Trinity Fleet won, and so did the reformers. Jag's dad still has a lot of sway with members of the hierarchy."

"So is this a good thing or a bad thing?" Zekk asked. "Our interactions with the Chiss haven't always been friendly, remember?"

"It does a people no good to be isolated forever," Tenel Ka said. "Sooner or later, the galaxy will always request you play a role in its drama."

She spoke with the gravity and wisdom of a great leader. Which, Jaina knew, was exactly what Tenel Ka had become.

She heard her name being called and looked back to the shoreline. Allana, Han, and Leia were marching up the beach, preceeded by long shadows as the sun set behind them. Jaina saw the exhausted looks on her parents' faces and suppressed an amused smile.

Her father caught it anyway. "Hey, don't laugh, kiddo. This is going to be you one day."

"I know," she admitted, "But not for a while."

Jaina dropped to a crouch to greet Allana. The girl seemed to be getting taller every time Jaina saw her. For a moment she just observed Allana's face, catching hints of Jacen and Tenel Ka in equal measure. Jacen had sacrificed himself two times over to make sure Allana would receive the best of her parents and none of the worst. Right now, she found herself trusting that Jacen had succeeded.

"What is it?" Allana tilted her head. "You're looking at me funny."

"Sorry," Jaina chuckled and squeezed her arm. "You doing okay, Allana? I heard you've been through a lot lately."

"I'm okay now," the girl nodded with a gravity that belied her years. "It's *you* I'm worried about."

"Me?" Jaina blinked.

"Grandma and grandpa say you're going away to the Empire," Allana frowned. "Why would you want to go and live with *them*?"

"That's where Jag's going," she said. "He's got a lot of work to do and I'm going to help him. And do some Jedi stuff for Uncle Luke on the side."

"Say hello to Emperor Reige for me," Han grumbled.

Jaina rose to her feet. "He's not *Emperor*, Dad. He's Head of State, just like Jag was. And he's doing a good job. He's willing to cooperate with the Alliance *and* allow the Jedi and Chiss a presence."

Leia slipped an arm around Han's and said, "Don't mind him, dear. We spent a long time fighting the Empire. It's a hard fight to let go of."

"Yeah," Jaina admitted, "I know what you mean."

"Well what are *you* two doing?" Zekk asked them. "Keep flying around on the *Falcon*, enjoying retirement?"

"Well, it's worked pretty good so far," Han said.

"You should come by more," Allana said.

"Don't worry, we will," Leia patted her red head and told Jaina, "I might even convince your father to swing by Bastion every now and then."

"I'm gonna need a *lot* of convincing," Han said.

"Don't worry, dear. I've had practice."

"I'm sure we'll all get together again," Jaina said. "Maybe when Lowie's kid is born."

"Oh yeah," said Han, "I forgot to send congrats for the new furball."

"You should probably phrase it better than that," Leia said.

"Well, you're the diplomat. You can figure out what to say."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Jaina hugged herself against a cool wind. She looked out at the deepening colors of sunset and the flashes of light on water. "It's not like this is an ending. It feels... more like a beginning than anything else."

Another breeze washed over the beach. Jaina enjoyed the cool air, the sound of waves, the light in the west.

Then Allana tugged her mother's arm and said, "I want to go in the water one more time."

"You take care of her," Han said, "She's got us beat."

"You're growing up to be very bossy, Allana," Tenel Ka warned.

As she tugged her mother toward the shore, Allana replied, "I'm a princess. I can be as bossy as I want."

Zekk chuckled and went after them, leaving Jaina to watch with her mother and father.

As Allana splashed salt water toward her mother, Han said, "You know, if you'd married Zekk you could be here all the time."

"*Dad*," she protested.

"Just saying," he shrugged.

"If I married Zekk we'd be off someplace doing Jedi stuff, and Tenel Ka would be alone with Allana. I'm glad how it worked out, for all of them. *And* I'm glad I married Jag, thank you very much."

"Just saying," Han muttered again.

Leia asked, "When are you leaving for Bastion? Are you going to meet Jag there?"

Jaina nodded. "His new position starts in about a week, but I'm leaving a little early."

"Going someplace else first?" Han asked.

"I've got one more thing to take care of," she said in a tone that warned against further questions. Her parents seemed to respect that, and turned their attention to the sunset and the child frolicking in the surf. She was glad, because she wouldn't have known how to answer them if they'd asked.

She didn't know exactly what Jacen had asked of her, or how she was going to do it, but she thought she understood the why, and for Jacen at least, *why* had been the most important thing.

She closed her eyes and savored the thing she'd finally found after years of need.

It was early springtime in that part of Mandalore. White and green blossoms sprouted from gnarled tree-branches but had yet to spread into full leaves. The air was warm and humid without being hot. The sky over the Beviin-Vasur farm was a dull overcast gray, and the furrowed earth was damp and pliant under Boba Fett's boots. A bit of misty rain had tinned on the roof of his helmet before, but now it had stopped.

He found Goran Beviin digging in a ditch. In lieu of his *Mando* armor, he wore a brown jumpsuit and knee-high boots caked with rich soil. Frankly, Fett thought he looked naked without his *beskar 'gam*, but Beviin didn't seem to mind. He was shoveling hard and didn't seem to notice Fett as he came up behind him.

He might have looked like a dirty farmer from any of a hundred worlds, but Beviin was a lot more than that, so when he finally stopped working and shoved the spade of his shovel into the ground, he said, “Welcome back, *Bob'ika*,” without even turning around.

Fett rankled a little at the diminutive. Beviin was the only person besides his father who ever called him that regularly. To most other beings he was 'Fett' or '*Mand'ador*.' He'd found he'd gotten used to the second title lately, which was surprising.

He'd come to ask Beviin a very specific question, but he supposed he owed the man a little small talk. It had been a long time since they'd met face-to-face and Beviin had been acting as his proxy during his time of exile, holding the nascent Mandalorian revival together. Anybody else probably would have tried to oust the distant *Mand'ador* and make himself leader, but not Beviin. Through some strange twist of personality, he was content to serve. And dig ditches.

“It's bigger than I remember,” Fett said, and waved a hand at the barns and farmhouses.

Beviin turned and fixed a white grin on him. “Been making good profits, *Bob'ika*. We've had the money to expand our facilities and even hire new workers.”

“You're not skimming from the state budget, are you?”

Beviin shook his head. “*Mando'ade* are still moving back home, and a lot of them are settling around Keldabe. Naturally, they need food, and if it's grown right outside town, so much the better. Supply and demand, *Bob'ika*. Simple economics.”

Fett's father had done farming too, during his youth on Concord Dawn. A lot of *Mandos* seemed to like working the soil, but Boba Fett knew didn't have the patience for it.

“You should go into town, if you haven't already,” Beviin said. “There's a lot of new construction there too.”

“I landed there. It almost looks like a *normal* city. Shops, housing blocks, pubs that serve more than just booze. New paved streets. Even lots of outsiders looking to sell stuff.” He couldn't quite bring himself to use the word *aruetisse*, not out loud. They hadn't made *that* much of a *Mando* out of him.

Beviin's face crinkled in a show of shared distaste. “Well, at least the *Oyu'baat*'s the same.”

Fett nodded. "There's that at least."

Beviin pulled himself out of the ditch, leaving the shovel sticking straight out of the earth. He began walking to the farmhouse and Fett followed.

"Any news on the Skiratas?" he asked.

"Heard they've gone back to Kyrimorut."

"Any of them swing by Keldabe?"

"Not that I know of." Beviin glanced over his shoulder.

"Why? And friends you want to catch up with?"

"Hardly," Fett snorted inside his helmet.

"It can't have been *that* bad," Beviin said. "You both got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"I guess so," he admitted. "Anything from Venku? You know, *Kad'ika*?"

"Just that he joined the other Skiratas at Kyrimorut. Why?"

"You know his *buir* died. The old Jedi, Gotab."

"I heard that." Apparently Beviin heard most everything, but that wasn't really surprising. "Does he blame you or something?"

"I was far away when it happened, so I don't think so. I just wonder what he's going to do now. The *di'kut* likes to prattle about *Mando* unity and he's probably going to do more of it now that he's back home."

"I know. I was riding my *shebs* all the time when we sent people to help Daala's Jedi problem. Kept saying we shouldn't get dragged into *aruetyc osik*." He looked over his shoulder again. "Sorry about her, by the way."

Fett was too, even though you could say he'd had a small part in her death. He tried to remind himself that she'd gone out in battle, taking a whole ship-full of crab boys with her. As deaths go, it had certainly been appropriate. She was never going to settle down and enjoy old age with her loving family.

Unlike Boba Fett, perhaps.

When they went into the farmhouse, Beviin made him take off his dirty boots. Fett hated having to do it, partly because he felt a little naked without them, and also because it was a sign he'd be staying indoors for a while, which wasn't his plan.

Beviin led him into the kitchen, where Medrit Vasur was firing the oven and Dinua Jeban was dicing some kind of red

meat. Dinua's two kids, Shalk and Brilla, were getting the table ready. Both of them had grown a lot since he'd last seen them. Shalk must have been in his early teens, and was probably getting trained to fight by Beviin and his mom. Right now, though, everybody except was wearing simple brown-cloth tunics, withoua bit of *beskar* in sight.

Fett noticed seven chairs at the table. One of those was probably for him, but that still left one extra.

"Is Jintar home?" he asked, naming Dinua's husband.

Dinua jerked in surprise and turned around. "*Mand'alor*! How did you get so stealthy?"

Fett stared at her through his helmet's black visor and said nothing.

"*Buir*'s off-planet," Shalk supplied. "Are you really him?"

The boy stared up at his *Mand'alor* with awe-wide eyes. Fett had to admit it felt good.

"Yeah, I'm genuine," Fett said. "Who's the other guest? Orade?"

"Ghes is with Jintar," Vasur said. He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Beviin and Dinua watched Fett but didn't add anything.

They were going to make him say it.

"Is Mirta here?" he asked.

"She took a walk," Vasur said. "Probably went south to that ridge by the river."

"She'll need to know that dinner's ready," Dinua said with a tight smile.

They watched him and waited, even the kids. Fett was glad they couldn't see his face.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll go get her."

He went back to the door, slid his boots back on, and went outside. They'd added new buildings in the years he'd been gone, and dug new ditches and planted new fields, but the basic geography of Beviin's farm was the same as he remembered.

He wound his way around one planting field, walked along a line of trees separating it from some irrigation ditches, then went into the forest that marked the edge of the farm.

Beviin and Vasur owned a lot more property than what they were using so far; they'd claimed it all right after the war with

the Vong, when the planet had half the population it did now. All the newcomers were pouring into Keldabe and the other cities and trying to make a living in that squalor, and Fett felt faintly bad for them. Growing up in the dirty alleys would be even worse than growing up in the septic white artificial environment of Kamino.

It took him about ten minutes to traipse through the forest. Some of the bushes had thorns that scratched against his leg armor, and it was vaguely satisfactory to crush them underfoot. On the downside, walking on uneven ground had his lower back ache; since taking the shot during the escape from *Phoenix*, his old body had been hurting more than it used to.

Yes, he wouldn't mind a little retirement. If Venku wanted to keep the *Mando'ade* at home and not fight *aruetisse* wars, Fett couldn't think up a counterargument right now. He imagined a lot of other beings would thank him.

He found her beyond the edge of the forest. She was dressed in her armor but had her helmet tucked under one arm. She was looking out past the crest of the ridge to the winding brown river and the faint rise of Keldabe's modest skyline in the distance. Her dark hair rustled gently in the breeze.

Boba Fett reached up and took off his helmet. He held it against his chest with both hands and breathed the moist spring air. It was almost enough to make him feel young again.

Mirta turned around. For a long moment they stared at each other, blank-faced and unmoving.

It was a moment Fett had been waiting for, hoping for, striving for over the past four years.

Now that it was here, he had no idea what to do. Of course, words had never been his strong suit.

Family either.

In the end, he managed to say, "Supper's ready."

Mirta regarded her grandfather with cool, inscrutable eyes. He wished she'd say something, anything.

Finally, she did. "Okay. Let's go, *ba'buir*."

She stared walking toward him, then past him and into the forest. Fett considered putting his helmet back on before going back into the tangle of bush and branches, then decided against it. If he got hurt a little, it wasn't the end of the world.

He followed her into the forest and kept good pace all the way to Beviin's farm. When they got close the faint scent of cooked meat rolled on the breeze. It reminded him of a warm stomach, sloshing ale, laughter.

It was a good smell.

Ben Skywalker sat on the balcony of his father's chambers, looking up at the stars spread across the night sky. On a world as sparsely-populated as Ossus, every point of light seemed to have its own unique shade and twinkle. In that it reminded him a little of Zonama Sekot.

His father stepped out onto the balcony with a steaming cup in either hand. Ben took one cup and drank. It warmed his body against the chilly, dry night air. His father settled along the edge of the balcony, and for a while they sipped hot caf in companionable silence.

Eventually, Ben said, "I met Mom on the planet."

His father didn't seem surprised. Then again, he had already felt Jacen's brief resurrection through the Force, and had gotten a more complete report from Jaina before she'd left for Hapes.

His father asked, "What did she tell you?"

"She said that I should try and save Vestara, not kill her." He looked into the black surface of his caf. "I guess I did. Kind of."

"She died for *you*, Ben," Luke said. "That's more than I ever thought she was capable of."

"I don't like people dying for me," Ben muttered. It had been hard enough going day to day with the burden of his mother's death weighing on him.

Luke reached out and put an arm around his son's shoulders. "It's never easy. You just have to be worthy of their sacrifice. And you will. You're young and you have plenty of accomplishments ahead of you."

"I don't feel young." Ben sighed. "I wish I did. It's funny. When I was little I wanted to be a grown-up all the time."

"I think that happens to everybody. It did to me."

"Dad... I'm not sure if Jaina told you, but apparently Jacen was protecting *me* when he fought Darth Krayt. I guess they'd

both been having visions about another Skywalker, a Skywalker from the future.”

“Sounds good. I always wanted grandkids.”

“Come on, Dad,” Ben rolled his eyes. “What does that mean, though? Is Krayt really dead? Or is he going to come back and mess around with my great-grandson in a hundred years’ time?”

Luke grew serious. “Yoda said the future is always in motion, and we can’t forget that. Otherwise we try too hard to control the future, and look where that got Jacen and my father.”

“When we were gone, did anything... happen? I know you went out, looking for signs of Sith.”

“You were the only ones who found anything. I went to Korriban with Corran, Valin, and Jysella. We found empty tombs and some newer structures, but they’d been stripped and abandoned. Octa Ramis and Seha Dorvald went to Ambria. Saba and Tesar went to Onderon and Jaden Korr led a whole team to Kesh. We even sent a group into the Deep Core, to Drummond Kaas and Tython, but Kyp and Kyle couldn’t find anything.”

“Any sign of the Morath Monolith?”

“The Quest Knights are still searching, but I’ve been re-thinking their mission. It’s important to find it, because it’s insurance against Abeloth if she ever comes back.

“But for a while I was thinking that just possessing the knife that can kill Abeloth would help bring balance to the Force. I think I was scared after what had happened with Abeloth, the Lost Tribe, and Darth Caedus.

“If we really want to tip the galaxy back into light, it won’t happen because we find some magic talisman. It’s going to happen by devoting ourselves to the will of the Force on a person-by-person basis.”

Ben tilted his head. “What does that mean exactly?”

“After the Yuuzhan Vong War, I allowed Jedi to go off and meditate and learn on their own. That worked fine for a while, but when the Alliance needed a coherent response to the Swarm War, I had to bring everyone back under direct control. I made people choose between the Order and their personal duties and beliefs. That made us lose good people like Tenel

Ka and Danni Quee, and looking back we lost Jacen then as well.”

Ben wanted to tell his father not to blame himself for Jacen's downfall, but Luke continued, “After the Dark Nest crisis, I made the opposite mistake. I made the Jedi too centralized. I locked us in a temple on Coruscant and made us self-appointed protectors of the Alliance, whether we were wanted or not.”

“You were just trying to help people and keep them safe.”

“So was Jacen, and look where that led him.” Luke shook his head. “We ended up alienating the people we wanted to protect. In getting so tangled up with politics we left ourselves vulnerable to Abeloth and the Lost Tribe.”

It seemed a problem without a solution. Ben asked, “What do we do now?”

“We're doing what we should have done from the start. A long time ago, Mon Mothma told me she wanted to 'a Jedi on every streetcorner.' She wanted Force-users to coexist with normal beings, working normal jobs and living normal lives. She certainly didn't want us to be warrior-priests who never showed in public.”

“Are we leaving Ossus?”

Luke shook his head. “No. This will stay our headquarters, and in time I think we should move the Academy back here as well. But I want most of our Jedi to be out in the galaxy, doing good wherever they can. I've already talked with Wynn Dorvan and he'll be introducing policy that will allow individual worlds to choose whether they want to allow a delegation of one or two Jedi each.”

“How about the Chiss and the Empire?” Ben asked. “Think they'd want Jedi on their streetcorners?”

“Well, we're going to have one Jedi in Bastion very soon,” Luke smiled a little. “It won't be easy for Jaina, but I'm sure she'll pull through. I'm also curious to see what Force-users she'll be able to find in Imperial space. I'm sure there are people with latent talents we've never had the opportunity to contact.”

“Imperial knights,” Ben said. “That's a weird thought.”

“The Jedi shouldn't be locked away in a tower, and neither should the Force. Jedi need to be free to explore the galaxy and

learn new ways of working with people and solving problems. Jacen was right about that, at least.”

Ben sighed and took another sip of his cocoa, finishing the cup. He set it down and reached into his jacket to pull out a slim datapad. He’d be waiting a long time to do this; for a while it looked like he never would.

“What is this?” Luke asked as he took it in his hands.

“When we were on Tatooine, Tahiri and I got stuck in a sandstorm. We had to take shelter in this abandoned homestead.”

He took out an old data-rod and slid it into the pad. “This got... lost for a little while, but I got it back in the end.”

“What is it?” his father frowned.

“Just watch,” Ben said, and flicked the player on.

A young man with a dark mustache appeared on the screen. He said, “Hey, Luke, how have you been? Well, we’re doing fine here on *Rand Ecliptic*. Still protecting and serving the galaxy, if you can believe that. It’s a lot different from the Academy though. I mean, you expect service to be different than the Academy, but you’re never really prepared for it.”

Ben watched his father’s jaw drop. He moved one hand to cover it and kept his eyes locked on the image in front of him.

A tall thin man came up and said, “Hey Biggs, who’re you talking to?”

“Just leaving a message for a friend back home,” Biggs Darklighter said.

“Oooh, is it a pretty girl?” A third man said. “What was her name, Camie?”

“No, it’s not her,” Biggs sighed. “Sorry to disappoint, Klivian.”

“Never hurts to ask,” Klivian replied.

“Anyway,” Biggs said to the screen, “We’re all doing okay here. I know you feel like you missed out, not going to the Academy and everything, but, well, maybe it wasn’t a bad choice. I never thought I’d miss that old dustball you’re on, but once you get into the thick of things, well, the galaxy can be a pretty complicated place. You wouldn’t believe it, but I really miss Anchorhead sometimes.”

"Listen Luke, we're in for a busy couple of weeks, so I don't know when I'll get a chance to send another message."

"Hey, keep it simple, Biggs," another man said

"Okay, okay. Anyway, I really think you should take some time, think about whether you really want to go to the Academy. Either way, I wish you good luck, Luke. I'm sure you'll make the right call."

Ben looked at his father's face and saw two slim wet trails gleaming in the starlight.

"Anyway," Biggs said, "Luke, tell Fixer and Camie I miss them but all's well."

"Oooh, Caaamie," Klivian teased.

"Hey, cut it out!" Everyone laughed.

"What about your friend Luke? Does he have a girl back home?"

"I don't know, do you, Luke?" Biggs asked. "Well, I hope you do. I hope you settle down and.... Well, no, I won't say that. I hope you do what you think's best. That's what we're gonna do, Luke. We're gonna do what we think's best."

"Hey, Darklighter..."

"Right, right," Biggs waved a hand. "Just remember that. I did what I thought was best, and so should you. I'm not sure when I'll see you again Luke, but I'm sure I will someday. Until then, keep flying straight. Biggs out."

The recording went dead. Luke put the datapad down with a shaking hand and wiped the tears from his face.

"Hey Dad," Ben said softly, "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay son," his father sniffed. "It's just... been a long road."

Long and hard, Ben knew. The decades ached with so much loss, and wounds that could never heal. But Luke Skywalker had come through it all, strong and whole, and gifted his son with the wisdom to do the same.

Father and son stayed together for a while after that. They sat in silence and watched the stars.

Nighttime in the desert.

It was a deeper dark than anything except the blackness of space. When the wind blew, it was dry and bone-chilling. The

sandy plain swept into invisible forever. The stars overhead were myriad. The more she looked, the more she saw. If she stared up at them long enough it felt like her body and left the ground and she was floating weightless in the endless expanse of the universe.

There was one signal of space and time. In the east, a dim and violet light hinted at the arrival of twin suns.

In all her life, Jaina had never stepped foot on Tatooine. She'd heard plenty of stories from her uncle and Tahiri, recounting the good and the bad of this dry, poor, lonely planet so far from the bright center of the universe. Somehow, despite being so dry, poor, and lonely, Tatooine had moved the galaxy time and again.

A slave boy from Tatooine had become a great and evil scourge, only to redeem himself and bring the Force balance in the end. The adopted son of a moisture farmer had rebuilt the Jedi Order and saved the galaxy time and time again.

And, too, a Jedi of the Old Republic had abandoned civilization to live with the native Tusken, only to die defending his people. And that Jedi's son had become a Jedi himself, and then a Sith, and the fight to stop his evil had entangled Jaina's family and most of the galaxy.

As she leaned on the cooling back hood of her landspeeder in the middle of the desert, Jaina Solo tried to figure out what made this place so special. The galaxy was full of backwaters where poor young beings dreamed of great futures. Yet somehow, time and again, lonely orphans from Tatooine had managed to shake and remake the galaxy.

As the child of a princess, raised in a palace on Coruscant and heir to a great Jedi tradition, Jaina Solo found this very humbling.

Maybe Jacen, in his dying moments, had sent her here to ponder that, but she knew there was more. She reached into her pocket and drew out the battered old cylinder Jacen had carried with him even when he was stumbling and dying through the forests of Zonama Sekot. She ran her hands over its cold metal surface and tried to figure out what Jacen had been trying to tell her.

She looked to the east. A rosy tint had joined the violets, and soon red and gold would come. Tahiri had said that nothing was more dramatic in the desert than sunrises and sunsets.

She squeezed the lightsaber that had belonged to Sharad Hett, and A'Sharad after him, and finally Darth Krayt. When two emerald lightsabers had ignited in the hands of the fearsome Dark Lord, a part of her had been surprised that they weren't the ominous blood-red typical of the Sith. It seemed that A'Sharad had kept his father's lightsaber for the better part of a century, not giving it up even when he transformed himself into a dragon. Jacen had shared that much with her as he lay dying, pried from Krayt's mind and passed to hers.

As he'd died, Jacen had passed other thoughts and images to her that she'd barely been able to process, let alone understand. She closed her eyes against the starlight and approaching dawn and remembered a figure in a vacuum suit, floating in orbit over a blazing star. She remembered another figure standing in the desert like she was now, waiting for twin suns to dawn.

And she remembered, most vividly of all, a scared teenage boy sitting on the sand, watching the suns set and swearing that nobody would ever take what he loved again.

She opened her eyes. Sunrise was approaching fast. Her mind lingered on that boy, his fear and his anger, and the bitter resolve that would drive him for the better part of a century.

It seemed very sad to her. Her brother must have felt the same way. It seemed possible, even likely, that Jacen had understood A'Sharad in a deep and fundamental way that she, who had never fully crossed over to the dark, never could. She didn't want to either, but she felt she had some understanding of the desire that had driven them both, and the way one moment-tragedy or triumph- could define a life there-after.

Yet for everything they'd had in common, Jacen had been no Sith Lord in the end. Whereas Krayt had drawn on his rage and fear until the end, Jacen had chosen the path of understanding and empathy. In dying, he'd left one last act of compassion for Jaina to perform in his stead.

Sharad Hett's lightsaber had been a scared boy's last relic of his father, and that boy had clung to the past as he became a man and ultimately a monster.

It was time to put the past to rest.

As she held Hett's weapon in her left hand, her right drifted down to her hip, where two more lightsabers dangled off her belt. One had been built by a Jedi Padawan of the Old Republic the better part of a century ago, and carried through the decades by a man who'd left the Jedi behind but never the Force, not really.

Her other lightsaber had been built on Yavin 4, as a child, and she had used it to fight and kill so many times: against the Shadow Academy, the Yuuzhan Vong, the Lost Tribe, Tsavong Lah, even her own brother. There was so much history in all those weapons, good and bad, and for a moment she felt impossibly weighted by the burden of all those legacies.

"I name you the Sword of the Jedi. You are like tempered steel, purposeful and razor-keen. Always you shall be in the front rank, a burning brand to your enemies, a brilliant fire to your friends.

"Yours is a restless life, and never shall you know peace, though you shall be blessed for the peace that you bring to others. Take comfort in the fact that, though you stand tall and alone, others take shelter in the shadow that you cast."

Uncle Luke had told her those words, at the ceremony for the survivors of the Myrkr mission. He'd said afterwards that they had come out of nowhere, as though the Force itself was speaking to him. He'd left her wondering just what it all meant, where her destiny as a sword would lead her.

Even then, after all the awful things she'd been through, she couldn't have imagined just what kind of burden it would be.

She squeezed her weapon tight and wondered what would happen if the Sword of the Jedi finally laid down her sword. She wondered what it would be like to finally live free of awful destiny.

That was something her brothers had never learned, either of them. But they were gone now, and she was alive, and she could live the life they never had.

She could live it for them.

The light at night's end spilled rose-gold across the desert. Jaina had to shield her eyes from the brilliance. In a matter of minutes, the rim of one sun peeked over the horizon, then

another. The featureless black of the desert became a vast landscape of dunes, bleds, ridges and distant mountains, all painted in shades of red and gold and marked by violet shadows.

Jaina Solo crouched to the ground. She began digging with both hands until she had made a large hole in the sand. She took out Sharad Hett's lightsaber again and looked it over one more time. It was a well-crafted device. It carried the scars of a century of wars and tribulations, losses and triumphs, heroic deeds and evil acts.

It was time to bury them all.

Jaina placed Sharad Hett's lightsaber in the hole. Then she pulled from her belt the weapon she'd built herself so long ago. She looked it over one last time, then dropped her sword into the pit. When it fell from her hand, she felt sweet relief.

Finally, she took her third lightsaber, pondered it for only a moment, then hooked it back on her belt. It was a legacy she was glad to carry.

She filled in the hole as thoroughly as she could. When she was done, she stood up and dusted the sand off her hands. She kicked at the ground, flattened it. She erased all signs of her presence, leaving a broad desert plain that was stark and blank and full of possibility.

Then she sat down and watched the rising suns.

